South Haven Tribune

$3

May 17, 2026

Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

From left, Quintin, Grant and Garrett Spencer work together to run the family business, which their dad started 40 years ago. Spencer Fire Trucks has since expanded to sell trucks out of state.

From barn to big rigs

Spencer Fire Trucks honors 40-year legacy in South Haven

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — From repairing trucks in a small pole barn to building custom emergency vehicles shipped across the country, Spencer Fire Trucks has spent the past 40 years growing as a local family operation rooted in South Haven.

Founded by Brian Spencer in 1986, the company began as a way to support his wife and five sons after struggling as a farmer.

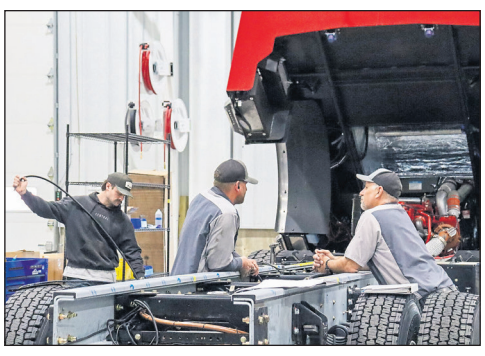
"Our dad, Brian Spencer, started the business 40 years ago, actually a few years before that, but didn't incorporate it until 40 years ago," Spencer Fire Trucks President Grant Spencer said. "Started off as farmers, and really couldn't afford to feed the five boys and family through the winter, so started working on cement trucks, repairing fire trucks and then grew it into building a fire truck."

Using his mechanical background from farming and volunteering with the Casco Township Fire Department and serving in the Air Force, Brian Spencer started by repairing cement and fire trucks.

"He worked at the local Casco Township Fire Department, and was their mechanic, handyman, and then did a lot of repairs for local departments and got known that way," Spencer Fire Trucks Vice President Quintin Spencer said. "Started and built one body, you know, hired one guy, and then another guy, and kind of, it's just grown a little bit every year since."

Photo provided / Spencer Fire Trucks

Brian Spencer founded Spencer Fire Trucks in 1986 after working as a farmer, volunteer fireman and serving in the Air Force.



Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

Spencer Fire Trucks makes custom-built trucks from all over the country, all while being based out of South Haven.

Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

A Spencer Fire Trucks employee works on a custom vehicle earlier this week. The South Haven company also manufactures fire trucks, UTVs and a variety of specialty trucks.

The brothers grew up watching the business grow from their backyard.

"Mom and dad started, it was just a barn," Spencer Fire Trucks General Manager Garrett Spencer said. "We had an office in the house. So, that's when we were growing up, this business was starting literally in our house."

He worked on the trucks in their barn and as the business grew, they built more barns to hold the trucks until they ran out of space.

"Over the course of 17 years, it just grew in our backyard," Garrett Spencer said. "Then, at that point, mom's like, 'We got to get out of here.' We got fire trucks coming down the driveway, semis coming down the driveway, so that was really the point where they needed to decide, are we taking this to the next level?"

In 2003, the family expanded to the building they are currently in.

Now the business has grown to service and build a variety of trucks from all over the country.

"When we first started, all our trucks went in a 30-mile radius, then 60-mile radius and then Southwest Michigan and then Northern Michigan and then the east side of Michigan," Grant Spencer said. "Now, we ship more trucks out of the state than in

See **SPENCER**, page A2

SH schools undergo position restructuring

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven Public Schools are planning to restructure different positions to help minimize the deficit in the district's budget.

"We've been talking all year long about the budget deficit that we've had and we've hatched a plan to minimize that deficit," Superintendent Ana Aleman-Putman said during Wednesday night's school board meeting. "Now we're at the point where I've had to reduce some positions."

The changes have mostly taken place in the district's alternative education program.

"We are restructuring the way that we run out alternative ed program, so it's our director of alternative ed position," Aleman-Putman said. "The middle school assistant principal, based on our strategic plan, we've moved that person around to a different position to help support our strategic plan. It's more aligned with what we need."

Aleman-Putman said the assistant principal position will be posted soon.

"I'm trying to stay away from the classroom as much as possible," Aleman-Putman said. "But it's hard, right? Because it is people's lives."

Technology purchase

The board discussed purchasing technology devices for the 2026-27 school year that would include desktop computers, monitors, iPads and laptops.

The devices are estimated to cost about $60,000, which would come out of the technology sustainability fund that is made up of leftover bond resources and other funds set aside for technology purposes.

"I'd like to shout out the tech department," Director of Non-Instructional Services Kevin Dee said. "The reason why it's only $60,000 this year, normally it's about a quarter of a million (dollars), but they do a lot of work and effort to repair our devices all internally and keep the devices in good shape so we can keep a little bit longer."

Other items

The board approved the parking lot replacement project set for Baseline Middle School. The project is scheduled to begin this summer and be completed before students return in the fall.

The project will include replacing the sidewalk from the gymnasium to the field and adding an ADA-ramp to the football field. Dee said the project will cost $872,646 and the money will come from bond funds.

The board approved the purchase of a new 71-seat passenger bus that would replace an older bus. The bus will have a camera system, cargo storage area underneath and be a new gas vehicle. The bus will be bought from the Holland Bus Co. for $144,958, which will come out of the bond proceeds.

Kayleen Ruiz from North Shore Elementary School was chosen for this month's student pride award. The staff pride award was given to Brooke Marley from Baseline Middle School.

Pride awards are presented once a month during the school board meetings to at least one South Haven student and staff member. Pride awards are a tradition the school has done for more than 12 years to honor those who have shown excellence in academics and character.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

Spring paving projects underway in SH

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — As part of the 2026 spring paving projects, portions of the city are being milled and paved.

According to a news release, paving of the South Haven Boat Launch, Dunkley Avenue and Bailey Avenue began on Monday.

Flaggers will be present and a detour to Blue Star Highway will be in place for Dunkley Avenue and Bailey Avenue.

The entire project is set to be complete by May 21.

Portions of the Huron Street Parking lot began paving on Wednesday as part of the 2026 Huron Street/Four Season Pavilion improvements.

Flaggers and signage will be in place to help direct traffic. This is phase one of two for paving in this parking lot. The entire project is set to be completed by June 15.

For questions or concerns regarding the spring paving construction, contact Bella Haberski at 269-637-0776 or via email at bhaberski@southhavenmi.gov.

For questions or concerns regarding the Huran Street parking lot construction, contact Levi Skuca at 269-637-0711 or via email at lskuca@southhavenmi.gov.

The Tribune: Celebrating Our 127th Year

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OBITUARIES

Mary Lou Halstad

Jan. 29, 1930 – May 5, 2026

Mary Lou Halstad, 96, of South Haven, Mich. passed away Tuesday, May 5, 2026 at River Ridge Assisted Living in South Haven.

She was born Jan. 29,1930 in Des Moines, Iowa to Elna and Ingvald Kleaveland. Her formative years were spent in Detroit and St. Joseph, Mich. where she graduated from High School in 1948.

She was preceded in death by her parents, her daughter, Charisse M. Halstad who passed in 2011, her husband Rod in 2016 and her brother Leonard Kleaveland.

Mary Lou graduated from Michigan State University with a BS degree majoring in physical education and minoring in art and social studies. Mary Lou taught in Litchfield, Covert, Bangor and Hillsdale, Mich. and was respected and admired by staff that she worked with and garnered the same appreciation from her students.

A dedicated educator, she always looked for creative ways to add to the curriculum, infusing her enthusiasm for the natural world into her classes. She will be remembered for her wit, creativity, sense of humor and sharing her knowledge and varied interests with all.

Mary Lou married Roderick Carl Halstad, who had moved to St. Joseph during their Senior year of High School, on Feb. 9, 1952 at Saron Lutheran Church in St. Joseph.

While living in Hillsdale, Mary Lou and Rod started "Tin Pie Bird Antiques" dealing in Early American Country Furniture and Primitives. They enjoyed buying, collecting and selling in Ann Arbor and Allegan, Mich. She also earned an Auctioneer's License from the State of Indiana.

Over the years, Mary Lou loved long drives with Rod, usually ending up at Lake Michigan. She appreciated her friends, enjoyed playing cards, cats, feeding the squirrels daily, rock hounding, camping and antiquing.

Service will be held at 11 a.m. on Monday, May 18 at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church, 06321 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven, Michigan 49090. Pastor Travis Wilson will officiate.

Friends wishing to make a memorial contribution could do so to Howard Christensen Nature Center16190 Red Pine Drive NW, Kent City, MI 49330 or to Isle Royale National Park, 800 East Lakeshore Drive, Houghton, MI 49931.

To those who choose to leave a memory or condolence please visit: www.starksfamilyfh.com.

Arrangements are entrusted to Filbrandt Chapel-Starks Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services. 269-637-0333.

Havis Walter King

Aug. 7, 1935 – May 11, 2026

On May 11, 2026 Havis Walter King went to be with the Lord. Born on Aug. 7, 1935 in Humphrey, Ark. to Herbert Franklin King and Neva Myrtle (Sinclair) King.

Havis is survived by his children; Carolyn Barnes, Stanley (Elba) King, Marilyn McEnaney, grandchildren; Amber (Chad) Langford, Christopher (Angie) King, Anthony King, Seth Wesseling, great grandchildren; Jayce Langford, MacKenna Langford and Tyler Clark, great-great granddaughter; Persephony Jade Wesseling.

Havis is preceded in death by his parents and siblings; Vernon King, JoAnn Wilson and Donna Warner. His wife of 64 years, Dorothy (Dot) King passed in 2019.

Havis moved to South Haven, Mich. in 1953 to work with his cousin Bobby Ryan. He worked at Michigan Fruit Canners, Bohn Aluminum, National Motors and S.E. Overton. Before retiring he worked at Interior Specialist of Holland for 8 years.

Havis was fiery and a cut-up. He always had something funny to say back to you. He was an outdoors man, loved hunting, fishing and golfing. He also bowled in a league for years.

Kindly share your thoughts on the family's online guestbook at www.starksfh.com.

Arrangements have been entrusted to Filbrandt Chapel of Starks & Menchinger Chapel and Cremation Services, South Haven 269-637-0333.

Marian Louise Le Vine

Nov. 28, 1947 – May 11, 2026

Marian Louise Le Vine, 78, Grand Junction, Mich., passed away Monday, May 11, 2026, at Bronson Methodist Hospital in Kalamazoo, Mich. Born Nov. 28, 1947, in Muskegon, Mich. she was the daughter of the late Carl and Helen (Brezinski) Demler.

Marian had worked as a waitress for many years, which was perfectly suited to her extremely friendly and hospitable nature.

She was always very happy and full of life. Marian loved to work outdoors in her garden. She was also an animal lover, especially horses and dogs. Above all else, though, Marian's family was the dearest to her heart.

She is survived by her sister, Janet Demler; sister-in-law, Nancy Demler; grandchildren, John Rawson, Jr., Max Rawson, and Amy (Rob) Ferrell; and great-grandchildren, Makyla Rawson, Blake Rawson, Kylee Rawson, and Evan Ferrell.

Along with her parents, she was preceded in death by her daughter, Kim Rawson; brother, Jim Demler; niece, Amy Demler; and her nephew, Jason Demler.

A celebration of Marian's life will take place from 4 to 6 p.m. on Thursday, May 14 at The School House in Grand Junction.

SPENCER

From page A1

Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

Spencer Fire Trucks manufactures service trucks from all over the country and is based out of South Haven.

the state."

The business grew through word-of-mouth references and didn't do any marketing until a year ago.

"At that time, no one had any idea it would turn into what it is today," Garrett Spencer said. "It was just a year to year thing and an organically grown business."

They now make trucks for departments in Florida, Alabama, Texas, Pennsylvania and Alaska.

"A big chunk of our business is still Michigan, Indiana, Ohio," Quintin Spencer said.

What makes the business stand out from other manufacturers is that all the trucks are custom made to order.

"It's a unique industry though," Quintin Spencer said. "There's five to 10 really big builders that produce a ton of trucks and then we're more in the middle, but we're pure custom, so we provide what the customer actually wants as opposed to forcing them into a model that is offered by others."

They make a variety of trucks along with fire trucks including UTVs, quick response trucks, specialty trucks for the state police marine division, crime lab and drone vehicles.

Even with the rapidly growing business, the family stayed in South Haven.

"We've had opportunities and ideas to make it easier to run a business out of this small town, but we're so family oriented, community oriented, we don't want to be anywhere else," Garrett Spencer said.

The brothers not only help run the business together, they work with the employees on building the trucks and help with whatever is needed.

"We all wear a lot of hats – always have," Garrett Spencer said. "We've had to and that goes for our employees, too. When you grow as fast as we've had over the past 10 years, we're just incredibly fortunate to have good people that are willing to adapt and help each other."

The biggest struggle Spencer Fire Trucks faces is a lack of space due to the fast growth of the business.

"Grant is well connected, knows a lot of people and we have a lot of opportunities to branch off and do other things, a lot of opportunities we just have to pass up on because we're simply too busy and consumed with what we're doing," Garrett Spencer said.

The brothers said their favorite part of the job is the people they meet and work with.

"We're building something to protect people – saves lives," Grant Spencer said.

Looking to the future, the brothers are hoping to continue growing the business.

"We're already looking at acquiring some more property and putting up another building to help continue the growth and keep it here in South Haven," Grant Spencer said.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Thanks to the community

To the Editor:

To the people of South Haven – you have overwhelmed us with your incredibly generous donation of approximately 4,600 pounds of food to the National Association of Letter Carriers' Annual Food Drive on May 9.

To our South Haven Postal Workers – we so appreciate your dedication to your job and the extra effort it takes to gather the donated food.

We would like to thank you for the largest donation made in recent history to the South Haven Area Food Pantry located at the First Congregational Church.

These food donations will help supplement many families that the Food Pantry serves. What a wonderful gift to our community.

With much gratitude,
The South Haven Area Food Pantry

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Al-Van Humane Society
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Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 11 am to 5:30 pm; Sat 11 am to 3 pm; Wed, Sun Closed

Meet our Pets of the Week, Gordita Crunch!

Gordita Crunch is a 5-month-old puppy who is just as sweet and lovable as her sister, Cinnabon. She loves squeaky toys and will happily bounce around chasing them, turning every play session into her own little party before settling in for snuggles. With her mix of cuddly sweetness and playful energy, Gordita Crunch is ready to bring lots of love and laughs to her future home. To submit an adoption survey, visit al-van.org/adopt! Keep the SH Mayor Fundraiser info please and thanks!

South Haven Pet Mayor Fundraiser
Nominations have started for the inaugural Pet Mayor of South Haven fundraiser! If you think your pet has what it takes to run the town, you can enter them with a $20 donation. As part of the nomination, you'll submit a photo and come up with a fun campaign slogan to help them stand out. Nominations will be open through May 11th, after which voting will begin, allowing the community to support their favorite candidates through donations.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST
Non-clumping clay cat litter

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YOUR SCHOOL OF CHOICE

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June 1st – June 12th

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2nd GR: 6 openings
3rd GR: 1 opening

Baseline Middle School
6th GR: 3 openings
7th GR: 3 openings
8th GR: 0 openings

Maple Grove Elem.
K: Unlimited
1st GR: 3 openings
2nd GR: 4 openings
3rd GR: 0 openings

SH High School
9th GR: 5 openings
10th GR: 5 openings
11th GR: 0 openings
12th GR: 0 openings

North Shore Elem.
4th GR: 6 openings
5th GR: 6 openings

OPEN for enrollment of non-resident students under Section 105 and 105c (Schools of Choice). Please see traditional school year grade openings (above).
ENROLL NOW!
Administration Building: 554 Green Street | www.shps.org > Enrollment > Enrollment Information
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Don Campbell / PMG file photo

Zoey and Lydia Heyn, of Zo's Mini Donuts, are expanding their business operation further north in Southwest Michigan with a pop-up location in South Haven this summer.

Zo's Mini Donuts expanding to SH

South Pier Creamery to host donut shop as seasonal option

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Zo's Mini Donuts will be making more dough with a new pop-up location in South Haven.

Beginning Saturday, May 23, customers can find Zo's Mini Donuts inside the South Pier Creamery, at 407 Phoenix St., South Haven.

The grand opening is from 8-11 a.m. May 23. Following the opening weekend, Zo's Mini Donuts will operate at the South Haven location seven days a week from 8-11 a.m. – Memorial Day through Labor Day.

"We have been wanting to expand to South Haven for years," said Zoey Heyn, co-owner of Zo's Mini Donuts. "We are so excited to finally have that chance and cannot wait to bring hot and fresh donuts to the community."

Zo's Mini Donuts was founded three years ago by sisters Zoey and Lydia Heyn, when Zoey was 15 years old.

Together, they turned a 1950s Coca-Cola trailer from the side of the road into their first donut stand.

Three years later, they run four seasonal locations with 22 seasonal team members. Lydia Heyn is now a graduate of Michigan State University, while Zoey Heyn will graduate high school this May.

Most recently, the Heyn sisters took home the top prize at Michigan's Next Big Pitch Competition in Lansing. Zo's Mini Donuts was one of five small business finalists who competed in the live pitch competition and was awarded a $10,000 cash prize.

In preparing for a fourth summer, Zoey and Lydia Heyn have made news in the business community by also contracting NIL deals with high school athletes. They're among the first in the state, and are the first in Berrien County to take advantage of the change to personal branding activities for high schools athletes, also referred to as name, image, likeness (NIL).

The Heyn sisters said they started Zo's Mini Donuts as a way to offer a budget-conscious third space for teenagers and families who are looking for a late-night, alcohol-free, post-sunset treat.

Pet-a-Cure offers pet care services in South Haven

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce recently welcomed Pet-a-Cure Grooming Boutique as a new chamber member.

According to a news release, Pet-a-Cure Grooming Boutique, "Where Pets Shine, Naturally," brings a heartfelt and deeply personal approach to pet care in the South Haven community.

Owner and groomer Erin Mishler grew up in a home filled with animals, where her love for pets was shaped by her mother, who bred and showed Shetland Sheepdogs for over 30 years. After her mother's passing in 2016, she continued that legacy alongside her aunt, eventually inspiring her journey into professional grooming.

Photo provided

The South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce recently welcomed Pet-a-Cure Grooming Boutique as a new chamber member.

"The concept of "Pet-a-Cure" began more than 30 years ago, when Erin and her aunt envisioned a pet care and consulting service that would support more natural, enriching environments in senior living settings," the release stated. "While Erin initially pursued a career in healthcare, working as a caregiver in senior living facilities and private homes and later retiring from homecare nursing, her experiences revealed the powerful connection between people and their pets."

Through her work in homecare, Mishler saw firsthand the need for flexible and accessible pet care, especially for those who are homebound. Studies show that pets can lower blood pressure, ease depression and provide a sense of purpose.

This realization gave new meaning to the name Pet-a-Cure and ultimately led Mishler to follow her passion for animals.

"Her first grooming client, a former homecare patient's toy poodle named Angel, played a special role in inspiring this new chapter," the release stated. "Built on a foundation of compassionate care, safety, trust and education, Erin is committed to treating every pet with kindness and respect while empowering pet owners with knowledge and guidance.

Through her work and community partnerships, she aims to make a positive difference for both pets and the people who love them.

To learn more or to book an appointment, go to www.petacuremi.com.

SH art center hosts annual member exhibition

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The 77th Annual Member Exhibition entitled "Off the Page" at the South Haven Center for the Arts opened with a special reception on Friday.

According to a news release, each spring the South Haven center for the Arts invites members to share artwork of a themed exhibition.

This year artists have submitted work in painting, pastel, digital media, fused glass, acrylics and fiber.

"Off the Page" will feature over 35 artists and 60 pieces of original art work across mediums. Many of the artists have created wall-mounted works with elements that emerge from the works surface as well as flat work.

"The member exhibition is such a unique exhibition that as a viewer, it's really interesting to see how the artist will interpret the theme each year," Center for the Arts Administrator Jenna Myny said in the release. "The theme this year kind of stumped some artists, but now the pieces being brought in by the artist and it's all really beautiful work, as usual!"

"Many pieces have drawn inspiration from books, stories and magazines," Myny said in the release. "It's always a joy seeing an exhibition come together and this one is no exception."

Among the artists featured in this exhibition are several artists joining the member exhibition for the first time including Talisha Cannaday with her oil and mixed media piece entitled "What was Written, What Remains! Echoes of Grace."

Deborah Correnti, a South Haven artist, will be exhibiting two paintings inspired by the writing of Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson.

South Haven artists Taylor Joachim brings hyperbolic geometry off the page through two hyperbolic crochet pieces and Kellie Terry is inspired by the words of Abraham Lincoln.

Most art works are for sale and the purchase of art supports both local artists and the South Haven Center for the Arts.

The center is open from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday and from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Thursday.

For more information, go to southhavenarts.org or southhavenarts on Facebook and instagram.

To contact the center directly, email info@southhavenarts.org or call 269-637-1041.

South Haven issues fireworks regulations reminder

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — As summer approaches and festivities draw near, the City of South Haven reminds residents and visitors of the local regulations for fireworks.

According to a news release, the city has a fireworks ordinance (Sec. 54-167) to ensure safety and enjoyment for all.

The use of consumer fireworks is permitted only during specific dates and times including:

■ Memorial Day: May 23 and 24 from 11 a.m. to 11:45 p.m.

■ Juneteenth: June 19 from 11 a.m. to 11:45 p.m.

■ Independence Day : June 29 through July 4 from 11 a.m. to 11:45 p.m. each day

■ Labor Day weekend: Sept. 5 and 6 from 11 a.m. to 11:45 p.m.

The regulations for fireworks outline several restrictions including:

■ Fireworks may not be discharged on any property owned or controlled by the City of South Haven without prior approval by the city council. This includes public rights-of-way, beaches, parks, marinas and city-owned facilities or land.

■ Fireworks permits for public displays must be obtained through application to the city council and comply with all requirements set by the Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs.

■ Fireworks may not be discharged at short-term rental properties.

Penalties for violations of the fireworks ordinance include a civil fine of $1,000 per incident, with $500 of each fine directed to the South Haven Police Department for enforcement activities.

"The City of South Haven urges all residents and visitors to celebrate responsibly and comply with local ordinances to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience for everyone," the release stated.

White Space Sells

People Do Read Small Ads. You Did!

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Reaction to hantavirus tinged by echoes of something else: COVID

By DEEPTI HAJELA
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The lingering impact of COVID-19, a few years out from the declaration that the pandemic was over, is scattered across how we live today – the work-from-home jobs, the way some have decided wearing masks is their new normal, the hand sanitizer dispensers that remain ever present.

Some other ripples, though, aren't as obvious. They're the ones we carry inside us – grief over lost loved ones, chronic health conditions, the sense of lives interrupted. And in recent days, another one has made itself known in the wake of a rare hantavirus outbreak aboard a cruise ship: the fear, despite official reassurances, that it might be happening again.

But the flourishing of fear, whether on a personal or societal level, can also be an indicator that something else is missing. Perhaps there's no post-pandemic reality more entrenched than the damage done, in the U.S. and globally, to the bonds that in the before times, many would have considered secure – science, government, information itself.

"COVID undermined our trust in what most of us used to trust," said Elisa Jayne Bienenstock, a research professor and sociologist at Arizona State University. "When general trust goes down, when there's a lot of cynicism, who are people looking to, to explain what to do and how the world works?"

What it used to be and what it is now

Before 2020, the outbreak of some illness somewhere didn't usually cause massive concern outside of the specific areas impacted, even as some epidemics caused significant numbers of deaths.

Some of that was complacency in the face of a world where widespread travel wasn't as accessible to the masses as it has become, which was a key part of COVID-19's spread.

In fact, there have been outbreaks of the current strain of hantavirus in some South American countries through the decades, like one in 1997 in Chile. Other countries have had epidemics of a range of illnesses from cholera to dengue to SARS, and the U.S. has seen West Nile, Legionnaire's and more.

But in a post-COVID-19 world, it didn't take long before questions and concerns surfaced about disease spread in the days immediately following the first reports that three people had died from hantavirus on the ship. Since then, there have been reports of 11 hantavirus cases around the world linked to the cruise, according to the World Health Organization, and that includes the deaths. Lab testing has confirmed eight of the cases.

Health experts have repeatedly emphasized that even though the virus can cause serious illness in those infected, the risk of spread in the general public is low. Despite that, when ship passengers were taken to the Spanish island of Tenerife to disembark, residents like Samantha Aguero were concerned.

"We feel a bit unsafe. We don't feel as there are 100 percent security measures in place to welcome it," she said. "This is a virus, after all, and we have lived this during the pandemic."

Institutions are diminished for many

Bienenstock points to three institutions that have suffered from the public's loss of trust: government, media and science itself. But government officials and journalists were dealing with issues of public mistrust well before the pandemic.

The mistrust of science got ammunition not because scientists were making mistakes in their processes but because nonscientists didn't have the same understanding, she said.

"Most people don't think of science as a process. In their mind, science is an answer, it's a fact. And so when those facts showed that they weren't 100 percent reliable and assured, it started undermining trust in the science," she said.

"One of the problems with COVID is it undermined that confidence in science for people who don't understand how science works. It showed the process. And it showed that scientists don't always have the answer," Bienenstock said. "A lot of people in crisis, when they fear things, don't care what the answer is, as long as there's a definitive answer. And science doesn't provide that when it doesn't know."

Now what?

It's not just about the issue at the forefront of people's attention at the moment. There are ripple effects as well.

"COVID ... didn't just heighten people's sensitivity to health threats. It did so unevenly, in ways often disconnected from actual risk," said Michele Gelfand, professor of organizational behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. "As trust in institutions has weakened, people have lost a key way to navigate uncertainty together. Without trust, people rely more on rumor, fear, and emotion, which can lead them to overreact to small risks and underreact to serious ones."

Karlynn Morgan, a 76-year-old retired nurse-anesthetist in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, has seen that heightened attention, with more people without a medical or science background talking about health issues than before the pandemic.

She has also been disturbed by the increase in what looks to her like a lack of trust in science, as seen in falling vaccination rates and rising instances of diseases like measles.

"I think people are far less trusting because people used to take their children and just get the vaccine," she said. "When I was a kid, there was no question you were going to go get your shot."

If trust is going to be rebuilt, Gelfand said in an email, then leaders have to get involved.

"They set the threat signal. They determine whether people get accurate information about the level of danger or distorted information that serves a political agenda. When leaders send clear, honest signals, people can calibrate in the face of threat. When leaders manipulate threat for their own purposes, norms erode and trust collapses," Gelfand said.

"Strong, reliable institutions have historically been our superpower as a society. They're what allow millions of people to coordinate under uncertainty without knowing each other personally," she said. "Without that institutional backbone, we lose the very capacity for collective action that has helped human groups survive for millennia."

USPS releases special edition bald eagle stamps for America's 250th

By SARAH RAZA
Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. — For America's 250th birthday, the U.S. Postal Service released special edition stamps featuring one of the nation's icons: the bald eagle.

The stamps unveiled Thursday at the National Eagle Center in Wabasha, Minnesota, showcase the bird across five major life stages, from a fuzzy hatchling to the iconic white-headed adult depicted on the country's seal. They were available for immediate purchase across the United States.

United States Postal Service / AP

A new stamp released Thursday, May 14, featuring an adult bald eagle.

"The fact that we're seeing the eagles in all different stages of its life, it's sort of making us look back at the stages of the life of our country," said Steve Kochersperger, a historian at the Postal Service. "At one time, we were just fuzzy little hatchlings, too."

The bald eagle has been a national emblem since Congress adopted the Great Seal in 1782, though it wasn't designated the national bird until 2024.

The bird has long symbolized American values like strength, freedom and independence, said Kochersperger. At the top of the food chain, the bald eagle dominates in the sky alone with its impressive wingspan and sharp talons.

Some believe Benjamin Franklin wanted the wild turkey to be the national bird because the eagle steals food from other birds, but Kochersperger said that's a myth.

There's another reason why it makes a strong American symbol: the bald eagle is a major conservation success story. In the 1960s, eagles became a rare sight in the U.S. because of poisoning by the pesticide DDT.

But that decline was reversed, thanks to a 1972 DDT ban and the bald eagles' listing as an endangered species in 1978.

"The public relations campaign brought greater awareness that, 'Hey, this is our national symbol, but they may all be gone if we don't change our ways,'" Kochersperger said. "And that turned out to be very effective."

In 2007, the bald eagle was removed from the endangered list, and there are now more than 300,000 eagles in the continental United States, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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36TH JUDICIAL DISTRICT
JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
Van Buren COUNTY

CASE NO & JUDGE
2026-075681-DO
Hon. Judge Susan Metzger

ORDER REGARDING ALTERNATE SERVICE

Court address:
212 E. Paw Paw St.,
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Court phone no.
(269)657-8200

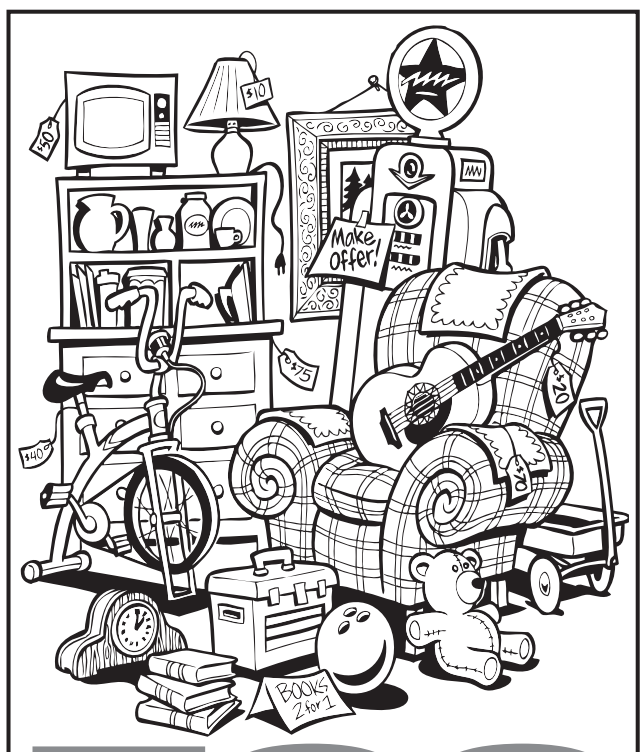
Robin Seltenreich
Plaintiff(s).

Wesley Todd (P74571)
136 E. Michigan Ave., Ste 800
Kalamazoo, MI 49007
(269)267-1655
Plaintiff's Attorney

V.

James Seltenreich
935B Phoenix St.
South Haven, MI 49090
Defendant(s).

THE COURT FINDS:
Service of process upon the defendant, James Seltenreich cannot reasonably be made as provided in MCR 2.105, and service of process may be made in a manner that is reasonably calculated to give the defendant actual notice of the proceedings and an opportunity to be heard.
IT IS ORDERED:
Service of the summons and complaint Order re: Alternate Service and a copy of this order shall be made by the following method(s).: First class mail and tacking or firmly affixing to the door at 935B Phoenix St. South Haven, MI 49090. Publishing for three consecutive weeks in the Van Buren County Legal News pursuant to MCR 2.106. For each method used, proof of service must be filed promptly with the court.
/s/ Susan Metzger, 05/04/2026



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BID PROPOSAL
Sealed bids, in triplicate, for the HIGH School Renovations will be received at **South Haven Public Schools Administration Building located at 554 Green Street, South Haven MI 49090 until June 4, 2026, at 3:00 pm local time**, or delivered to GDK Construction, 12 W. 8th Street, Ste #250, Holland, MI 49423 on June 4, 2026, until 12:00 pm local time. Bids received after this time will neither be considered nor accepted. The **bid opening will be a public opening at 3:00 pm located in the basement conference room at the Administration Building located at 554 Green Street, South Haven MI 49090. This bid opening can be viewed using the following Teams link.** https://teams.microsoft.com/meet/246132167350503?p=MACglf24gp0rJqD5AU
All proposals received by the time and date stated above will be opened and read publicly.
In accordance with Section 1267 of the Revised School Code each bid must be accompanied by a sworn and notarized Familiar Disclosure Statement completed by the bidder disclosing any familiar relationships between the Owner or any employee of the Bidder and any member of the District's Board of Education or the Superintendent of the District.
SITE INSPECTION
A construction **pre-bid bidder investigation walk through** will be held at the **High School (600 Elkenburg ST, South Haven, MI 49090) on May 26 at 3:30 pm local time.** Meet at the entrance to the Listiak Auditorium, bidders can look around the facility. All bidders are encouraged to attend.
BID DOCUMENTS
The Bidding Documents may be viewed via GDK Construction's Datto Workplace site at https://gdk.workplace.datto.com/filelink/6b471-3519557f-130db20221-2 or at Grand Rapids Builders Exchange. Bidding Documents will be available after **May 13.** Please note that contractors are responsible to review information on all drawings and specifications.
Please notify GDK of your intent to bid or not bid as soon as possible. This ensures you receive all current bidding documentation. Please email Lisa Knoll at lknoll@gdkconstruction.com.
BIDDER QUALIFICATIONS
Bidders submitting a Bid for this Project shall have qualifications as follows: a. shall be a reputable, recognized organization, with at least five (5) years successful experience on work of this type and scope of this project; b. shall have a license where required by public authorities having jurisdiction; c. shall have ample financial resources for work of this magnitude.
BID SECURITY – PERFORMANCE BONDS
Each bid shall be accompanied by good and sufficient bid security or bid bond in an amount not less than 5% of the Bid amount and shall secure the Owner from loss or damage by reason of the withdrawal of the Bid by a Bidder or by failure of the successful Bidder to enter into a Contract with the Owner if his Bid is accepted by the Owner.
The successful Bidder will be required to secure Performance, Labor and Material bonds for all contracts exceeding $50,000 from a surety company having a rating of A- or better, for the full amount of the Contract.

Fire destroys SH home

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Several fire departments responded to a house fire in South Haven on May 7.

According to a news release, South Haven Area Emergency Services responded to a structure fire at 849 Phillips St. and arrived to the house fully engulfed in flames.

The six occupants evacuated and one resident was transported to the hospital for treatment of burns and smoke inhalation.

Neighbors reported hearing a series of explosions. The explosion sounds caused nearby schools to be put on a lockdown for a short period of time.

Mutual aid was requested from the Bangor Community and Covert Township fire departments. A second alarm brought Hartford and Watervliet fire departments to the scene.

Michigan Gas Utilities turned off the gas supply to the residence.

Photo provided / South Haven Area Emergency Services

South Haven Area Emergency Services firefighters spray an active fire May 7 at 849 Phillips St. in South Haven.

The Red Cross assisted the displaced residents and the South Haven Department of Public Works and the South Haven Police Department assisted at the scene.

Medieval circus coming to Flywheelers Museum

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — A world of medieval mystery, high-flying acrobatics and family-friendly comedy is coming to the Michigan Flywheelers Museum.

According to a news release, The Kingdom of Wonders Medieval Circus will perform four shows at 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. on May 30, and 31.

"Considered a non- traditional circus, the Kingdom of Wonders is more a theatrical renaissance adventure that ditches the traditional clowns and animals in favor of a narrative-driven experience," the release stated.

In order to make professional entertainment accessible to all, Kingdom of Wonders offers free tickets for every performance. While admission is free, it does rely on concession sales and donations to support the performers and production costs.

Photo provided

The Kingdom of Wonders Medieval Circus will perform a medieval mystery, high-flying acrobatics and family-friendly comedy show at the Michigan Flywheelers Museum.

The comedy-based 100-minute show, which includes a 15-minute intermission, is designed to captivate children and adults alike with its acrobatics and juggling acts as you follow a brave knight and his sidekick as they attempt to reclaim the kingdom from a mischievous witch and her dragon.

"We are thrilled to bring this brand-new, one-of-a-kind production to the beautiful grounds at the Michigan Flywheelers Museum," the release stated. "Our goal is to create a space where every family in the community can experience the wonder of live theater, regardless of their budget."

Online reservations are recommended to help staff manage capacity. Seating is provided on a first-come, first-served basis and doors open 30 minutes prior to showtime.

Traditional circus treats including popcorn and soda will be available for purchase.

For more information and to reserve a free ticket, go to www.thekingdomofwonders.com.

Michigan Flywheelers Museum to host unique fundraiser

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The Michigan Flywheelers Museum is gearing up for their unique fundraiser, "Petals and Power Tools," on May 23.

According to a news release, the event will take place from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. where community members can sell, buy and swap flowers, plants, power tools and hand tools

Participate have two options: unlimited outdoor space for $5 or $15 for pavilion spaces which includes two tables and two chairs.

"We wanted to add something that is different from our usual events," Michigan Flywheelers Museum President Patrick Ingalls said in the release. "While people are welcome to sell items, we are also hoping there will be a lot of trading and bartering going on."

Registration for participants will take place from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. on May 23 with the event opening up to the public from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is $1 for non-participate with kids 12 and under free.

"This event is strictly for flowers, plants and tools," Ingalls said in the release. "No furniture, clothing or household items. We want to keep it focused on those items."

Proceeds from the event will go to the museum's $100,000 Challenge Grant.

"The grant is dedicated to the first phase of a transformative new entrance to the museum designed to make the property more accessible and improve the visitor experience at one of the region's most popular historical destinations," the release stated.

To donate items, residents can drop them off at the museum by May 20 before 3 p.m.

The Michigan Flywheelers Museum is located at 06285 68th Street, South Haven.

For more information, go to www.michiganflywheelers.org or the museum's Facebook page.

SH historical association hosts annual open house

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The Historical Association of South Haven will host its annual Open House and membership drive kick-off on May 23.

According to a news release, the open house will take place from 6 to 9 p.m. at Forest House in downtown South Haven.

The program will feature Keith Howard who will present "Prohibition Era Brewing in Southwest Michigan."

"This will be an exploration of the rich history of pre-prohibition brewing in our corner of Michigan," the release stated. "Keith will reveal newly discovered facts about some of the first brewers in the area nearly 200 years ago and we will learn how local option brought an end to the era in 1915."

Howard is a digital preservation specialist at the Kalamazoo Public Library and a former instructor of business communication and information technology at Western Michigan University.

"He is a two-time West Michigan University graduate with a passion for exploring and documenting local history, as well as a postcard collector and writer," the release stated.

The open house begins at 6 p.m. with themed cocktails and light hors d'oeuvres. The program will start at 7:30 p.m.

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The Blossomtime Royalty Float, featuring Miss Blossomtime Taylor Costanza, first runner-up Brianna Friedrich, second runner-up Emma Birkhead, Miss Congeniality Maya Gonzalez, Mr. Blossomtime Dominick Lignell, first runner-up Beau Kirtdoll, second runner-up Antonio Jordan and Mr. Nice Guy Giovannia Ayala takes part in the 2026 Blossomtime Grand Floral Parade on May 9.

Don Campbell / PMG staff

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9 to 10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays through May 26, 2026.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge: Chicago Scoring at 1 p.m. on Tuesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

Bridge: Duplicate Scoring at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

First United Methodist Church: Free meals every Tuesday night. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Meal is served at 6 p.m.

South Haven Memorial Library: Bridge Card Game from 1 to 4 p.m. every Tuesday and Wednesday. Open to the public. Beginners are welcome.

Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for students grades 6 through 12 every Monday from 3 to 5 p.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: May 1 through 31 "Deep In the Branches" (by 2026 Bailey Fall Conference Keynote Speaker Danae Wolfe) StoryWalk

South Haven Farmers Market: Open from 8 a.m. to 2pm on Saturdays, from May to October; and on Wednesdays from June through August.

May

17 – Scott Club: Concert Series featuring Jazz Pianist Redwood at 3 p.m.

17 – First Congregational UCC: Spring Concert Series featuring Annie and Rod Capps at 3 p.m.

19 – Scott Club: Michigan's Lady Senator Eva McCall Hamilton at 1 p.m. in person at Scott Club and on Zoom.

20 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

21 – South Haven Memorial Library: Intro to Zine making from 4 to 5:30 p.m. Free program for adults and teens ages 14 and up.

23 – South Haven Memorial Library: Astronomy Club at 11 a.m.

23 – Michigan Flywheelers Museum: Petal and Power Tools fundraiser from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

23 – Historical Association of South Haven: Annual open house and membership drive kick-off from 6 to 9 p.m. at Forest House.

24 – South Haven Area Emergency Services: Sit down/ drive-thru pancake breakfast from 7:30 to 11 a.m. at 90 Bluestar Hwy. South Haven, MI.

26 – Rotary Club: Morning meeting. Presentation will be South Haven High School Principal Amy Cockburn.

27 – South Haven Memorial Library: Friends of the South Haven library meeting from 2 to 3 p.m.

28 – Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: Starting at 6 p.m. "Taking Time to be Present" with Jodi Henley | Find Your Path LLC. Feeling overwhelmed with your responsibilities? Losing sense of who you are? Looking for ways to reground and recenter? Join us for an hour or so of slow walking and gentle, guided meditative activities to help you feel present and connected to the world and your place in it.

29 – South Haven Memorial Library: Parent Cafe from 11 a.m. to noon.

30 – South Haven Memorial Library: Musical Storybook at 11 a.m.

30-31 – Michigan Flywheelers Museum: Kingdom of Wonders Medieval Circus performances at 3 p.m. and 6 p.m.

The South Haven Tribune makes every effort to ensure accuracy in its stories.

If you believe there is an error, please contact the editor of the page on which it occurred. If you are unsure who to contact, call 269-637-1104 to be directed to the appropriate editor.

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FOCUS

What's in the price of a gallon of gas?

By ROBERT I. HARRIS
Assistant Professor of Economics, Georgia Institute of Technology (The Conversation)

The U.S. Energy Information Administration expects nationwide retail gasoline prices to average near US$4.30 a gallon for April 2026 – the highest monthly average of the year. The political response has been familiar. Georgia has suspended its state gas tax, other states are weighing their own tax holidays, and the White House has issued a temporary waiver of a law known as the Jones Act in hopes of moving more domestic fuel to East Coast ports.

As an energy economist, I am often asked about what contributes to gas prices and what different policies can do to affect them.

The price of a retail gallon of gas is the sum of four things: the cost of crude oil, refining, distribution and marketing, and taxes.

In nationwide figures from January 2026, crude oil accounted for about 51 percent of the pump price, refining roughly 20 percent, distribution and marketing about 11 percent and taxes about 18 percent. That mix shifts with conditions: When crude oil prices spike, that can drive more than 60 percent of the price; when the price drops, taxes and logistics are larger shares of the cost.

Crude oil is the biggest ingredient

Because the price of crude oil is the largest element, most of the price at the pump is derived from the global oil market.

Usually, big swings in crude prices come mainly from shifts in global demand and expectations – not from supply disruptions, according to widely cited research in 2009 by the economist Lutz Kilian.

But what is happening in early 2026 with the war in Iran is one of the exceptions: a classic supply shock. Severe disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and attacks on Middle East oil infrastructure have taken millions of barrels a day off the global market.

Most drivers generally can't quickly reduce how much they drive or how much gas they use when prices rise, so gasoline demand doesn't change much in the short run. That means a jump in crude costs tends to result in people paying more rather than driving less.

Refining, regulations and the California puzzle

Refining turns crude into gasoline at industrial scale. The U.S. doesn't have a single gasoline market, though. Roughly a quarter of U.S. gasoline is a cleaner-burning blend of petroleum-derived chemicals called "reformulated gasoline," which is required in urban areas across 17 states and the District of Columbia to reduce smog.

California uses an even stricter formulation that few out-of-state refineries make. California is also geographically isolated: No pipelines bring gasoline in from other U.S. refining regions.

California's gasoline prices have long run above the national average, explained in part by higher state taxes and stricter environmental rules. But since a refinery fire in Torrance, California, in 2015 reduced production capacity, the state's prices have been about 20 to 30 cents a gallon higher than what those factors would indicate.

Energy economist and University of California, Berkeley, professor Severin Borenstein has called this the "mystery gasoline surcharge" and attributes it to the fact that there isn't as much competition between refineries or gas stations in California as in other states. California's own Division of Petroleum Market Oversight says the surcharge cost the state's drivers about $59 billion from 2015 to 2024. It's not exactly clear who is getting that money, but it could be gas stations themselves or refineries, through complex contracts with gas stations.

Getting the gas into your car

The distribution and marketing category covers the costs of everything involved in getting the gasoline from the refinery gate to your tank.

Gasoline moves by pipeline, ship, rail and truck to wholesale terminals, and then by local delivery truck to service stations.

At the retailer's end, the key factors are station rent and labor, the cost to buy gasoline in bulk to be able to sell it, credit card fees of as much as 6 to 10 cents a gallon at current prices, and franchise fees paid to the national brand, such as Sunoco or ExxonMobil, for permission to put their branding on the gas station.

Most gas station operators net only a few cents per gallon on fuel itself – which is why many gas stations are really convenience stores with pumps out front. Borenstein and some of his collaborators have also documented that retail gas prices rise quickly when wholesale costs climb but fall slowly when wholesale costs drop.

The question of gas tax holidays

The federal government charges a tax on fuel, of 18.4 cents a gallon for gasoline and 24.3 cents a gallon for diesel. States charge their own taxes, ranging from 70.9 cents a gallon for gas in California to 8.95 cents in Alaska.

When gas prices rise, many politicians start talking about temporarily suspending their state's gas tax. That does reduce prices, but not as much as politicians – or consumers – might hope. Research on past gas tax holidays has found that consumers get about 79 percent of the reduction in gas taxes. That means oil companies and fuel retailers keep about one-fifth of the tax cut for themselves rather than passing that savings to the public.

Gas tax holidays also reduce funding for what the taxes are designed to pay for, typically roads and bridges. That pushes road and bridge upkeep costs onto future drivers and general taxpayers.

There is an additional problem, too: Taxes on gasoline are supposed to charge drivers for some of the costs their driving imposes on everyone else – carbon emissions, local air pollution, congestion and crashes. But Borenstein has found that U.S. fuel tax levels are already far below the true cost to society. Removing the tax on drivers effectively raises the costs for everyone else.

The Jones Act: A small number that adds up

The 1920 Jones Act is a federal law that requires cargo moving between U.S. ports to travel on vessels built and registered in the U.S., owned by U.S. citizens, and crewed primarily by U.S. citizens and permanent residents. Of the world's 7,500 oil tankers, only 54 meet this requirement. Only 43 of these can transport refined fuels such as gasoline.

So, despite significant refining capacity on the Gulf Coast, some U.S. gasoline is exported overseas even as the Northeast imports fuel, in part reflecting the relatively high cost of moving fuel between U.S. ports.

Economists Ryan Kellogg and Rich Sweeney estimate that the law raises East Coast gasoline prices by about a penny and a half per gallon on average, costing drivers roughly $770 million a year. In light of the war's effect on gas prices, the Trump administration has temporarily suspended the Jones Act requirements – an action more commonly taken when hurricanes knock out Gulf Coast refineries and pipeline networks.

What moves the number

The result of all these factors is that the price that drivers see at the pump mostly reflects the global price of crude, plus a stack of domestic costs, only some of which are inefficient.

Tax holidays give a partial, short-lived rebate. Jones Act waivers trim pennies, though permanent repeal may cause more fundamental changes, such as reduced rail and truck transport of all goods, which could lower costs, emissions and infrastructure damage associated with cargo transportation. Harmonizing fuel blends across states and seasons may lower prices somewhat, but likely at the expense of increased emissions.

Ultimately, the best protection against oil price shocks is a more efficient gas-burning vehicle, or one that doesn't burn gasoline at all. In the meantime, the best I can offer as an economist is clarity about what that $4.30 actually buys.

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Cesar Gallardo / Getty Images

FOCUS

Photos by Elizabeth Flores / The Minnesota Star Tribune / TNS

Lloyd the turkey gets excited by a branch on the farm in Appleton, Minnesota, on Wednesday, April 22, 2026.

48,000 fans, *zero game*

Will Lloyd, Minnesota's most famous turkey, ever get the girl?

By LAURA YUEN
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

Arguably the most famous bachelor turkey in all of Minnesota is a handsome idiot named Lloyd.

Lloyd has a global Facebook fan base of about 48,000 who've followed his ridiculous exploits on the farm, such as cluelessly romancing basketballs, sticks and other inanimate objects. Never in his eight years has he been spotted properly mating with an actual turkey. His owner is determined to see if he could learn new tricks in his older age and find true companionship.

You see, Lloyd the pet turkey is lonely. Last fall on the Dalarna Farm – Heather Benson's 65 acres in rural Lac qui Parle County, three hours west of Minneapolis – the last of Benson's turkey hens died. Lloyd sank into a long depression. Typically content to spend his days strutting for no one in particular, Lloyd stopped his swagger. He barely ate or socialized with his chicken friends. He slept in.

"I was genuinely afraid he would die of sadness," Benson recalls.

He eventually snapped out of his funk. But with the spring thaw, Lloyd began to make poor decisions. He would wander away from the farmyard, edging toward the vast prairie surrounding it, where a coyote or bald eagle could strike.

Benson was convinced Lloyd was beckoning female turkeys from the wild. But his approach to looking for love was going to get him killed.

Lloyd is a chaotic protagonist in a story about male loneliness, internet celebrity culture and the depths of human devotion for the animals we love.

In Minnesota, which produces more turkeys than any state, Lloyd is probably the only one to have his own 16-page literary magazine, called Snood, referring to the fleshy attachment to a male turkey's beak that can become engorged and turn bright red when aroused. Female turkeys prefer dudes with long snoods. (I learned about the organ from Benson, whom I suspected was pulling my leg, until an internet rabbit hole confirmed it was all true.)

Lloyd is also probably the only resident turkey whose likeness is printed onto T-shirts donned by people as far away as Copenhagen. He is our avian version of Punch the Monkey. He's odd, hilarious and relatable – much like Benson.

Erin Shadle, a therapist from Asheville, N.C., stumbled upon Benson's writings online several years ago while she was struggling with a personal loss. She was familiar with wild turkeys in her city but not about domestic ones like Lloyd. A post about his antics and failed romantic relationships "was exactly the humor I needed," she says.

Heather Benson places her turkey Lloyd into a puddle of water to cool him down on her farm known as Dalarna Farm in Appleton, Minnesota, on April 22.

"He bumbles unapologetically through life. He tries so hard to be a turkey and do his best," Shadle tells me. "He's like so many of us. We try to put the pieces of life together, and we don't get it quite right. But he doesn't care. He's going to do what he wants to do. I wish we could all be so true to ourselves."

It helps, she adds, that Benson adores him, not in spite of his awkwardness, but perhaps because of it. Lloyd will always be cared for.

"May we all be so lucky," Shadle says.

Sensing Lloyd's desire for a new friend, Benson posted singles ads on farming Facebook groups in hopes of procuring a new turkey bride. She even drove two hours east to a bird swap meet in Hutchinson, Minn. That's where I first met Benson, who arrived in her Kia Soul with a cage full of hope. The cage followed her home, empty. Breeders showed off their pigeons and roosters, but no turkeys were for sale.

The single promising lead she left with – the phone number of a southeast North Dakota turkey farmer who swore he'd be in touch – evaporated when the farmer stopped responding to Benson's texts. It dawned on her that even turkeys can be ghosted in modern dating.

But weeks later, Benson returned to Hutchinson and bought two sister hens from another breeder for $50 apiece. Her daughter named them Lulu and Libby.

Heather Benson's turkey Lloyd follows her around as she completes her chores around her farm.

Benson kept followers of her Dalarna Farm page on Facebook abreast of the developments. Most had been reading Benson's stories about Lloyd for years, chuckling over his obliviousness and, um, affection for leather Wilson basketballs. In one spectacular failure described by Benson, Lloyd mounted a hen but fell asleep on her before he could finish the deed.

Upon hearing about Lulu and Libby, readers cheered on Lloyd, hoping for a fairy-tale ending.

"I'm rooting for a beautiful love story for Lloyd that doesn't involve sports equipment!" one fan chimed.

Benson says she started writing her observations about farm life to relieve stress. She grew up with a mom who struggled with borderline personality disorder and alcoholism, so chaos was Benson's baseline. Running a farm today feels comfortably normal.

If you tend to a ragtag crew of guinea fowl, ducks, horses, dogs, cats, sheep and turkeys, "silly drama and horrible drama happen every day," says Benson, who is 45. "Where there's livestock, there's deadstock. Accidents happen. Weird stuff happens."

The tagline on Benson's Substack and social media accounts, "Hogs, horses and hilarity reside here," belies the tenderness and bittersweetness that at times tinge her writing. Though she describes them as "50 souls with bad ideas," these animals have gotten her through tough winters, the deaths of friends and a divorce. Hard decisions need to be made about whether an animal lives or dies, so good days are not taken for granted.

Benson's accounts fascinate city folk like me, who never thought about turkey sex, and resonate with anyone who has unconditionally cared for an exasperating animal.

When photographer Elizabeth Flores and I roll up to the long dirt driveway leading to Benson's farm, one thing we are not prepared for is the indisputable fact that Lloyd is a stunner. His white tail feathers, ringed with black like a single stripe on the collar of a country-club polo shirt, are already fanned out as he greets us near the farmhouse.

Moments later, he is humping a weed. The day before, he was seen seducing a bag of cement.

Still, Lloyd is mesmerizing by any measure. Get close to a turkey strutting, and you can hear a low thumping sound deep in his chest. Turkeys "drum," as it's called, to attract mates or establish dominance. Lloyd follows us everywhere on a 90-degree day, thumping and humping.

Until this point, the sister wives, Lulu and Libby, have not met Lloyd. They've been quarantining the past two weeks in a trailer. They're domestic turkeys, known as bourbon reds, identifiable by their reddish-brown hue.

"They're the color of basketballs, which might work in our favor," Benson says hopefully.

She warns me that we're not expecting Lloyd and the gals to make a big to-do, the way dogs excitedly sniff and greet each other face to face. Parallel play, the way toddlers co-exist, is the best-case scenario.

Benson unlatches the door to the trailer as Lloyd lurks close by. I start shooting video on my phone. Lulu doesn't leave the trailer. But Libby hops out and immediately squats on the grass.

"OK, she's asking him to mate with her," Benson narrates, as if we are witnessing a key scene in a David Attenborough film. "Oh, my. Things are moving quickly."

Sure enough, Lloyd beelines over and climbs onto her, nearly toppling Libby, who is a third of his size. His claws dig into her back, and he falls off a few times. Loose feathers fly into the wind. "It's not graceful," Benson adds.

But Lloyd and Libby are, unmistakably, mating. Their tail feathers kiss before the birds decouple, apparently satisfied. In the end, Lloyd the underdog got the girl.

Lloyd's mom is astonished. Benson later posts a video of the tryst, and his fans celebrate. They want to know what happens next. Will there be babies? Did Lloyd know what to do all along?

Benson will write it all down, as she always does. In a life where painful stories are never far off, an absurd turkey romance is something people can hold onto. It's proof that even the most hapless among us can find connection, if someone cares enough to see it through.

And, yes, eventually, someone will have to break the news to the basketball.

FOCUS

Photos by Stephen M. Dowell / Orlando Sentinel

VPK students wearing purple LENA Grow vests listen to teacher Shelby Kubusheski (left) read at The First Academy in Leesburg on April 23.

'Every hour counts'

Daycares track conversations to boost language skills

By MICHAEL CUGLIETTA
Orlando Sentinel (TNS)

Teacher's assistant Katelyn Motter, left, listens to 4-year-old Sutton Repetti, right, at The First Academy in Leesburg on April 23. Sutton is wearing a purple LENA Grow vest. LENA Grow is a program in which preschoolers wear vests that have monitoring devices in them, which record how many conversational interactions they have with their teacher throughout the course of the day. The idea is that it tracks how much the students are being exposed to language so the teachers can make sure that each child is getting access to the language.

ORLANDO, Fla. — Once a week, children at First Academy Preschool in Leesburg, Florida, wear purple vests equipped with electronic devices that work like fitness bracelets. But instead of steps, these devices track the number of conversations each child has with their teacher.

The goal is to help boost the preschoolers' language skills.

Data from the vest devices is shared with teachers, who can monitor how often they talk with each child in their classrooms and gain insight into the quality of those conversations. Then they can increase frequency as needed, working on avoiding yes-or-no questions and instead asking children things that will elicit thought-out responses.

"It's impacted the way we communicate with the kids. It adds more depth into our conversations," said Shelby Kubusheski, a teacher in the pre-k classroom. "I like it because it helps expand their vocabulary also."

First Academy is one of 400 preschools in Florida that has adopted the LENA Grow program, developed by a nonprofit in Colorado with the mission to "transform children's lives through early talk."

The state budgeted $975,000 in 2025 for the effort, which covers the costs of the equipment and coaches who help teachers analyze the data recorded inside those small purple vests.

The program aims to show early-childhood teachers ways to engage children in constructive conversation and to make sure every child in the room is part of that effort.

Children in childcare centers typically get fewer opportunities to talk to adults than they do at home, the program's research found, and those conversations can also vary from child to child.

Talking with adults is key to developing language and other skills, like controlling emotions and following rules, that set kids up for success in school, so the program wants childcare centers to improve both the number and quality of those conversations.

Numerous studies show it helps, LENA Grow advocates say.

One study published last year, for example, found the program had "positive effects" at Head Start programs. Classes that used it showed more "improvements in children's early literacy skills" compared to control classrooms that did not, according to an October article in the journal Child Language Teaching and Therapy.

The key to the program is the devices inside the vests, which recognize the pitch of a child speaking or a baby babbling and the pitch of an adult and capture when an adult speaks and a child or baby responds or vice versa. Those "conversational turns" are tallied but the actual words spoken are not recorded.

After class, data from the devices is uploaded into spreadsheets showing how many conversational turns each child had. More turns, or back and forth between teacher and child, indicate a child is engaged in the discussion. Coaches then review the data and show teachers ways to improve their conversations.

Brandi Simmons, the director of First Academy, is using the program with the 100 students in her 3-and 4-year-old classes this school year.

In one class, the first week of data showed that the teacher averaged between 16 to 28 "turns" per child each hour. By week three, that figure had jumped to as high as 42 turns per child.

Coaches also zeroed in on times when conversation lagged, such as lunch, and brainstormed ways to keep everyone talking.

"We may have some teachers who just kind of eat their lunch, too. And they don't talk to the kids," Simmons said. "But they're learning that during lunch, we're going to talk about, 'What did mom pack for you today? Do you like cantaloupe? You've never tasted cantaloupe? Well, ask your mom to get you some cantaloupe so you can taste it'."

Recently, Simmons expanded the program into her infant and toddler classrooms, where her charges wear even tinier vests.

"It's making it more literacy rich for children, gets their minds thinking, exposing them to that critical thinking, that back and forth," she said.

Children wear their vests one day a week for five weeks. A parent must sign a consent form and most do. But if a parent does not want their child to take part, the child still gets a vest, but one without a transmitter, so they won't feel left out.

The data also lets teachers pinpoint kids who are speaking less than their peers and then work to determine if the child is shy or perhaps has signs of a speech delay the parents should discuss with their pediatrician.

"Teachers feel empowered with this data. They're able to change some of their behaviors in the classroom, able to see real changes in the children," said Rocy Gomez O'Keefe, chief growth officer for LENA.

The Lake County Early Learning Coalition, which oversees state-funded pre-K and subsidized childcare programs, introduced LENA Grow four years ago, before the state funding was available. The coalition used federal COVID-19 relief money to implement it in 150 preschool classrooms. With the new state funding, it has brought the program to 70 more classrooms.

"I feel like it's an 'aha moment' for providers and teachers," said Lesha Buchbinder, CEO of Lake's coalition. "They see this data and they're like 'I had no idea. I didn't realize that my teachers weren't talking. I didn't realize that our conversational turns were low. I didn't realize the importance of ensuring that those conversational turns are higher'."

Now all but two of Florida's 30 early learning coalitions are trying it out. The Florida Legislature has not yet decided if it will be funded for another year.

Jennifer Grant, CEO of the Seminole County coalition, put the program in 10 preschools and will collect data from teachers to determine if she wants to expand it.

Grant directed the program to infant and toddler classes thinking those teachers could benefit most from the training since they typically do not have as much education as teachers in pre-k classes.

"There's a misconception that infants and toddlers don't need as high a level of teacher," Grant said. "But infants are born hardwired to connect. Those neural connections are the foundation for future learning. They stick their tongue out and make a noise and you do it back and then the baby responds."

LENA Grow, Grant said, shows teachers they are not just there to change diapers and feed the children but play a critical role in a baby's development.

"If the teacher is quiet all day and the child just babbles, then they are not getting any feedback for communication," Grant said. "And if the teacher just talks at the child all day but doesn't wait for a response, they're not building that foundation for communication."

Grant also likes the program because it gives teachers feedback without the intrusion of a classroom observer.

"I've been a classroom teacher. Having somebody stand in your classroom and observe you while taking notes is a little intimidating," Grant said. "But this is something, they can go about their day, they can follow their routine as they should and still get great feedback."

Kubusheski, the First Academy teacher, said the data brings out her competitive nature but also highlights what's important in her classroom.

"Every hour counts. I have to make sure I'm making my rounds every hour, and everybody's getting those conversations."

HEALTH

MAYO CLINIC Q&A

What does a *VO2 max* have to do with overall fitness?

By MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK (TNS)

DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I like to challenge myself physically, whether it's working out, cycling or cross-country skiing. I've heard about VO2 max testing. What could I gain from it?

ANSWER: A VO2 max test measures the amount of oxygen you breathe in and use at peak levels of exercise intensity, and it assesses how well your heart, lungs and muscles work together during aerobic (cardio) exercise. Whether you're an athlete or not, a VO2 max test can provide insights into your cardiopulmonary fitness.

Due to the cost and specialization of the equipment, a VO2 max test is typically conducted in a sports medicine setting or an academic exercise science department. Be sure to check with your insurance provider to see if this service is covered.

What to expect

During the test, the person wears a breathing apparatus while running on a treadmill or biking on a stationary cycle. Gradually, the exercise protocol becomes more difficult, such as increasing speed, ,grade or pedaling resistance. They're instructed to exercise as hard and for as long as they feel like they physically can.

The equipment then captures the peak volume and flow rate of air being inhaled, later converting that data into the maximal volume of oxygen consumed and the rate of energy expenditure.

The results give the participant a baseline value. For instance:

- If a person is more sedentary, their baseline may be in the 20s (20 milliliters/kilogram/minute – ml/kg/min) of peak oxygen consumed.
- For someone who's fairly active – maybe participating in a recreational activity coupled with some strength and cardio training – their score may be in the 40s.
- Those with a VO2 max in the 70s probably are elite-level endurance athletes.
- Elite cross-country skiers may have a VO2 max score in the 80s and possibly even 90s (80-90 ml/kg/min).

Thousands of published studies support the finding that cardiopulmonary fitness is associated with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, sleep apnea, metabolic syndrome and a number of other chronic health conditions, in addition to reduced risk for all causes of mortality.

Improving cardiopulmonary fitness

Your VO2 max isn't static. It can be improved with consistent exercise or training.

For example, someone who's inactive can use their baseline values as a starting point. Working with a trainer or other fitness professionals, they can build a cardiopulmonary workout program using the most effective strategies to improve their cardiopulmonary fitness. Doing cardiovascular exercise three to four days a week may improve their VO2 max by 20%-30 percent over three to six months. The key is exercising regularly, and as fitness improves, gradually push the limits. This also can be done by adding high-intensity intervals to a program.

Dreamstime / TNS

A VO2 max test measures the amount of oxygen you breathe in and use at peak levels of exercise intensity.

Those with higher VO2 max scores to start with will have less room for improvement, since they're already at a higher fitness level. Genetics also play a role in aerobic fitness.

Test functions

Athletes are the most common participants in VO2 max tests. They're usually familiar with the test and how the measurement can be used to enhance their performance. This objective feedback is one way to help them measure progress and shape their training regime. For example, they may map out their training sessions based on what percentage of their VO2 max they want to work at that day.

People who have had heart attacks or heart surgery typically enroll in a cardiac rehabilitation program. This often involves a stress test with cardiovascular function measured in real time by an electrocardiogram (ECG) unit. Throughout their rehabilitation, the test provides feedback for exertion levels, which also helps them rebuild their cardiopulmonary fitness. While not a VO2 max test, it encourages similar behavior of consistent, progressive physical activity.

Wearables, such as smartwatches, can provide good feedback on heart rate and regular exercise outputs. However, they aren't sophisticated enough yet to reliably measure VO2 max.

But people also have a built-in measure of fitness. You know when you get out of breath and tired, whether it's on a long walk, climbing stairs or shooting hoops. This knowledge is subjective and doesn't provide hard numbers, but it can be a useful guide as you work to improve your fitness.

For instance, you may be winded after climbing a flight of stairs. You start moving more, walking for 30 minutes rather than 15, notching up your walking speed or walking a more challenging route. After a few weeks, climbing those stairs might not be so hard. You know your cardiopulmonary fitness has improved, but you don't know by how much.

Some people want to see the hard numbers to confirm how they feel. That's what a VO2 max test can provide.

– Andrew Jagim, Ph.D., Sports Medicine, Mayo Clinic Health System, La Crosse and Onalaska, Wisconsin

Can *peptide injections* help people recover from injuries?

By FLYNN MCGUIRE
University of Utah
(The Conversation)

It's tough to avoid the current hype about the health benefits of injecting peptides. Although these substances – essentially, synthetic bits of protein in solution – have long made the rounds in the fitness world, their popularity has exploded. Social media influencers, podcasters, wellness clinics and online sellers promote peptides as a quick and easy way to build muscle faster, heal injuries more quickly, reduce inflammation, lose fat, sleep better and more.

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has repeatedly backed broader access to peptides. In April 2026, the Food and Drug Administration announced plans to consider allowing some of them to be made to order at specialist pharmacies after banning them in 2023.

But do these products actually work, and can people who use them be sure they are safe?

Two of the most-hyped peptides widely promoted for injury recovery are BPC-157 and TB-500, sometimes marketed together under the comic book-sounding nickname the "Wolverine stack."

That stack is part of a much larger longevity and fitness boom in which vendors sell or promote many different peptide products, often for uses that have not been studied rigorously in people. Online, people swap dosing protocols, compare "stacks" and describe these compounds as shortcuts for everything from tendon recovery to fat loss and muscle gain.

I am a physician in physical medicine and rehabilitation who spends a lot of time thinking about how people recover from musculoskeletal injuries, including tendon problems, ligament sprains, muscle strains and joint injuries. After digging through the evidence on these compounds, I think the gap between the marketing and the science is much wider than most buyers realize.

Peptides can be real medicines

A peptide is just a short chain of protein building blocks called amino acids.

Some peptide drugs are important, legitimate medicines. Insulin is one example. GLP-1 drugs are another.

The issue is not whether something is a peptide but whether it has gone through the long process that makes medicines credible: reproducible manufacturing, careful dose testing, clinical trials for a specific condition and ongoing safety monitoring.

BPC-157, TB-500 and other internet-hyped peptides have not gone through that process. Such peptides are often sold online as supplements, or as research-grade products made for laboratory use but not FDA-approved as a treatment for people.

That distinction matters, because it means that producers might prepare such peptides at different concentrations, using different solvents, stabilizers and other ingredients. In other words, one vial of what's supposedly the same substance would not necessarily be the same as the next, even if it were made by the same producer. And there's no requirement that manufacturers ensure that products are free of contaminants.

Different vials could thus potentially behave differently in the body and may carry different risks, such as infection. That is a big problem if people are injecting something sold online as a shortcut to recovery.

The evidence for BPC-157

BPC-157 was discovered in the early 1990s as an isolated version of a peptide fragment linked to compounds found in stomach acid.

Early research focused on benefits for the gut, but because some animal studies suggested the compound could help promote blood vessel growth, calm inflammation and support tissue repair, researchers years later began testing it in cell and animal models of tendon, ligament, muscle, bone and cartilage injury.

upsidedowndog / Getty Images

Some hints from those studies are promising, which is why influencers and scientists got excited about BPC-157.

But in humans, the evidence is extremely thin. In fact, for common sports and orthopedic injuries, it's close to nonexistent, as my colleagues and I found when we reviewed the published literature on BPC-157 for musculoskeletal healing in 2025.

The one published study we found in people included only 16 participants with knee pain. It relied on their self-assessment to gauge improvement and didn't compare the group that received the peptide to one that did not. Those flaws made it impossible to tell whether the improvement was due to placebo effects, because many injuries get better over time anyway, or from the peptides.

Other reviews uncovered similar limitations: For musculoskeletal injuries, the studies in people are too sparse and low quality to pin down whether the peptide works or what risks it poses.

Basic, practical questions remain, too – such as what dose people should use, how long the compound lasts in different tissues and whether the product in a purchased vial actually matches its label.

TB-500 claims are even harder to evaluate

TB-500 has a slightly different story. It is usually marketed as a synthetic product related to a naturally occurring peptide called thymosin beta 4, which is found in many tissues.

Thymosin beta 4 has attracted scientific interest because it appears to be involved in processes relating to tissue repair, including cell movement, how new blood vessels form and how tissues respond to injury. Animal studies suggest it may support bone healing after fractures as well as muscle repair.

Researchers are beginning to study thymosin beta 4 in people – though, so far, most studies look at safety and not recovery from sports injuries.

Here's the issue, though: TB-500 is a smaller piece of thymosin beta 4. This means that research on thymosin beta 4 does not necessarily show that TB-500, the version most commonly sold online, helps a person recover faster from a tendon, muscle or joint injury.

Another complication is that the biological processes thymosin beta 4 seems to promote, such as new blood vessel growth and cell migration, don't just occur in bone or muscle healing. They also play a role in other contexts, such as scarring, abnormal tissue growth and cancer biology.

This does not prove harm, but it does mean these are not simple, risk-free recovery supplements. Human studies don't just have to show that thymosin beta 4, TB-500 or products sold under that name help people recover from common sports injuries, but also that these products are safe for long-term use.

So far, data on safety is scant. A recent analysis of more than 12,000 Reddit posts about using BPC-157 and other peptides after musculoskeletal injuries or surgery found that users frequently raised concerns about side effects, product purity and long-term safety. For example, some users reported injection-site reactions, diarrhea and emotional numbness. Studies like this one rest on low-quality, anecdotal evidence, but it's the only evidence available for most of these peptides.

How to think about bold peptide claims

What makes the current peptide craze so confusing is that BPC-157 and TB-500 are not miracle cures, but they are not pure nonsense either. They sit in a more uncomfortable middle ground: interesting biology, intriguing findings in animal studies and, realistically, no convincing proof that they promote musculoskeletal healing in people.

In other words, peptides on the whole can be real medicines. But that does not mean the vial being marketed online is a safe, tested treatment for an injured shoulder, Achilles tendon or knee.

When you encounter wellness influencers or online sellers promising the glamour of faster healing, better recovery or a more aesthetic body, a few mundane questions can help cut through the marketing:

- Has this exact product been tested in people with my injury?
- Was it studied at the same dose and by the same route being marketed online?
- Do I know exactly what is actually in the vial?
- Is the promised benefit strong enough to justify the risk of using a product that has not cleared the usual standards for drug quality and evidence?

For now, none of those questions yield a clear, positive answer.

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Warangkana Charuyodhin / Dreamstime / TNS

Understanding growth charts and all the different aspects of your child's health that factor into them can be difficult, ask your pediatrician, family doctor, or nurse practitioner to help you understand if you have questions.

Understanding growth charts and percentiles

By NICOLE ANANIA, DO, MS, FAAP
American Academy of Pediatrics (TNS)

When you go to the pediatrician for a well-child check, you'll always review your baby's or child's growth together. One of the most important parts of a well-child checkup is the review of a child's growth. Growth can be a reflection of a child's overall health and nutrition. It can also help identify underlying medical conditions. So, it's important to understand what your doctor or nurse practitioner says about your child's growth.

In the first 2 years, pediatricians use one growth chart that looks at a child's head circumference (a measurement of the widest part of their head), as well as their weight and length. We watch for changes in the size of head circumference in infancy because we want to know that the brain is growing.

What we want from a growth chart is to map out the growth trend for children. Unlike school grades where we strive to score as high as possible, for growth we hope for consistency. When your child comes in at the 10th percentile, it's really no better or worse than coming in at the 90th. What we care about most is the trend at which your baby or child gains weight, height or head circumference.

After age 2, you can use the same growth chart to track your child's growth until they're 20 years old. In addition to weight and height, we also look at body mass index (BMI). BMI helps show whether a child's weight is a healthy match for their height and indicates if they are at risk for becoming overweight and the health complications that come from that.

A variety of factors, including genetics, environment, nutrition, activity and health problems can influence how your child grows. Parents, pediatricians and nurses have been using growth charts since the late 1970s to track growth in infants and children. The charts were revised in 2000, when research showed that data for the first charts didn't accurately reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of our communities.

It is important to review your baby's or child's growth frequently so that you and your pediatrician can identify any changes to the trend. Often, simple steps can be taken to help ensure your child's ongoing healthy growth.

When you're looking at a growth chart, focus on how your child is changing over time. One static point on the growth chart isn't as useful as evaluating five data points over time. As you follow your child's growth chart along from infancy into toddlerhood, you'll notice frequent changes. As your child gets older, these changes may happen less often. It is the rate and trend in your child's growth that is important, rather than the specific number.

Understanding growth charts and all the different aspects of your child's health that factor into them can be difficult. Ask your pediatrician, family doctor or nurse practitioner to help you understand if you have questions.

If your doctor doesn't have a computer in the examination room, ask to see the growth chart on paper or on a screen in the office. Many parents find it exciting to look back and see how much their child has grown since the last visit. The human body is pretty amazing – your baby will double their weight by about 6 months and triple it by around 1 year.

At times, your pediatrician may use additional information and charts to help them understand your child's weight and growth over time. In particular, the doctor may use extra information when your child's measurements fall above or below the percentile curves on the growth charts.

Z-scores may be part of the additional information used by your pediatrician. Z-scores allow pediatricians to understand and compare children's weights even when they are above or below the percentile growth curves.

If you have a challenge understanding how your child is growing or how the growth chart is presented, keep asking for clarification. It's OK if you don't understand the presentation of facts on these charts, but have confidence to speak up and ask the doctor or nurse practitioner to explain it.

Nicole Anania, DO, MS, FAAP, served as the Implementation Scientist on the American Academy of Pediatrics Faltering Weight Clinical Practice Guideline. Most recently, she was a Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Kentucky and Medical Director for Inpatient Pediatrics at Med Center Health in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

MAYO CLINIC Q&A

What are the signs your child may have a heart condition?

By MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK (TNS)

DEAR MAYO CLINIC: My child seems more tired than other kids, they don't keep up like they used to and have complained of chest discomfort when playing or running. Could these be signs of a heart condition?

ANSWER: Symptoms like fatigue or chest discomfort in children are common and often have simple, nonserious explanations. Chest pain is one of the most common reasons children are referred to a pediatric cardiologist, but fewer than 5 percent of cases are related to the heart. However, symptoms during exercise or a noticeable change in your child's usual activity level may be worth a closer look.

Heart conditions in children can present in several ways. Some are congenital, meaning a child is born with them. Others are acquired and develop later, sometimes after an illness or infection. There are also genetic conditions that may not be obvious at first but can lead to heart problems over time. More severe congenital heart conditions are usually diagnosed soon after birth and may require treatment in the first months of life. Milder forms may not cause symptoms right away and are sometimes found when a murmur is heard or as symptoms develop over time.

Warning signs

Warning signs can look different depending on a child's age. In infants, heart problems may show up as poor feeding, tiring during feeding, poor weight gain, fast breathing or fewer wet diapers. Some babies may seem sleepier than usual or not waking well enough to feed. These symptoms can appear in the first weeks of life, particularly in babies with larger congenital heart defects.

Because babies can't tell you what they feel, noticing changes in these everyday patterns is especially important and should be evaluated promptly.

In older children, symptoms that occur during physical activity tend to raise more concern. For example, chest pain is more worrisome when it happens during intense exercise, feels like pressure and doesn't change with breathing. It may be especially concerning if the child also experiences shortness of breath, dizziness or fainting during activity.

Shortness of breath can have several causes in children, but what matters most is whether there has been a change. A child who previously kept up with others but now falls behind, takes more breaks or struggles with activity should be evaluated more closely.

Symptoms

Some symptoms shouldn't be ignored. These include:

- Passing out, especially during exercise.
- Chest pain with activity.
- Fast heart rate that doesn't slow down at rest.

A racing heartbeat that is difficult to count or doesn't slow after activity should be evaluated right away.

Changes in skin color can be another warning sign. A bluish color around the lips, tongue or inside the mouth may indicate low oxygen levels and should be checked out promptly.

Family history also matters. A history of heart disease in close relatives can increase the likelihood that a child may be affected. Family history is especially important when there's cardiomyopathy or unexplained death, particularly during exercise or sleep. In these cases, children may need screening even if they seem healthy. Some inherited heart conditions don't cause symptoms early in life, so knowing the family history can help identify children who need follow-up.

If a child is evaluated for a possible heart problem, the visit often starts with a detailed history and a careful physical exam. Depending on the situation, the child may have one or more tests. These may include:

- An electrocardiogram to assess the heart's electrical activity.
- An echocardiogram or ultrasound of the heart to evaluate its structure, blood flow and function.

Not every child will need testing. Sometimes the history and exam suggest a harmless cause, such as an "innocent" murmur, that doesn't require additional tests or treatment. In other cases, these studies help clarify whether there's a structural or rhythm-related problem.

Most of the time, symptoms in children, such as chest pain, palpitations or fatigue, aren't caused by heart disease. Pediatric heart conditions are relatively rare. Even so, symptoms still deserve attention so that children who need care are identified early, and others can be reassured.

Most children with these symptoms won't have a heart condition, but signs such as fainting, a racing heartbeat that doesn't slow down at rest, or a clear change in activity level shouldn't be ignored. If something feels different or concerning, it's appropriate to have your child evaluated.

– Josué Maldonado Custodio, M.D., Cardiology, Mayo Clinic Health System, Eau Claire and La Crosse, Wisconsin

Pollen allergies are brutal this year

A doctor explains why, and how to find relief

By LEVI KELLER
University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus (The Conversation)

Spring means beautiful flowers, fragrant lilacs – and lots of tree pollen coating cars and setting off sneezing, wheezing and headaches.

As an allergist and immunologist at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, I help patients with seasonal allergies and associated allergic diseases manage their conditions, and one question comes up year in and out: Will this season be worse than last year?

With a record warm start to spring 2026 in much of the U.S., the answer is a teary-eyed "yes."

What are allergies?

More than 1 in 4 U.S. adults suffer from seasonal allergies. That number is expected to increase as climate change results in longer and more intense pollen seasons.

When someone talks about having allergies, they are referring to a condition called allergic rhinitis or allergic conjunctivitis – inflammation of the nose or eyes related to allergen exposure. This results in itchy, watery eyes, runny nose, sneezing, congestion and nasal passage itching. They show up when allergens are in the air, during spring, summer and fall.

The big driver of seasonal allergies is a protein in pollen. Pollen is the male reproductive material that plants release to spread their species.

Those pollen proteins become problems when the immune system develops an allergic antibody known as IgE to these proteins. When several IgE molecules bind to the allergen when it lands on the tissues of the eye or nasal passages, the cells release molecules such as histamine, prostaglandins and leukotrienes. These molecules interact with blood vessels and nerves to trigger the symptoms that allergy sufferers know all too well.

Which pollens cause allergy symptoms?

Pollen season starts with the trees.

In late winter and early spring, trees begin releasing pollen in many places in the United States. Not all trees follow this schedule – mountain cedars, or juniper trees, for example, can release clouds of yellow pollen from November through January in Texas, causing a condition known as cedar fever.

As the year progresses, grasses will emerge and their pollen will cause symptoms through most of the summer – typically April to July.

Then ragweed and other weeds release pollen that causes symptoms into the fall until a freeze stops their pollen production.

What makes one pollen season worse than others?

Several factors can influence how bad a season can be when it comes to seasonal allergies. The two big ones are the length of the growing season and the amount of pollen in the air. Both are expanding.

Over the past several decades, as global temperatures have risen, the growing season has lengthened in many parts of North America. Once temperatures begin to be above about 40 degrees Fahrenheit, trees will begin to emerge from dormancy.

That's what the Western U.S. saw in 2026, as an unprecedented warm spring drove the early emergence of tree pollen. In some locations, growing season is two weeks longer on average than in the 1990s and more than four weeks longer than in the 1970s.

Another factor driving pollen production is the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide, largely from the burning of fossil fuels. Higher carbon dioxide levels increase plant growth, leading to longer pollination periods and more pollen produced by plants. With higher pollen counts, more people can develop symptoms. Consequently, I have been seeing more patients who are experiencing allergies for the first time.

Windy days can also blow pollen into the air and spread it over a wider area.

Rain and humidity can affect pollen counts as well. Rain can temporarily scrub pollen from the air. But humidity and moisture after the rain will result in ruptured pollen granules, resulting in pollen that is easier to carry on the wind and breathe in. This is particularly the case with grass pollen.

So, how can you avoid allergy symptoms?

There are many ways to manage allergy symptoms.

The first is to try to avoid the allergen by making changes in your home to reduce exposure. Keeping windows closed during the pollen season will reduce the amount of allergen that can enter your home. Wiping down pets with a damp towel can reduce the amount of allergens they bring in. Avoiding using clotheslines can reduce pollen levels on washed items.

Changing clothes or showering after being outdoors can reduce the amount of allergens that remain on you.

Using HEPA air purification in the home can reduce household allergen levels. Look for non-ionizing air purification; ionizing air filters can generate ozone, which worsens indoor air quality.

To know when allergens are getting worse outside, watch the pollen forecast from the National Allergy Bureau. As a general rule, pollen counts are highest in the morning. However, outdoor air pollutants can increase in the afternoon when pollution, including particulate matter (PM2.5) and ozone, reach peak levels in the midday and afternoon heat.

Do medications work?

Medications can help alleviate symptoms. A saline nasal rinse can reduce mucus and allergens inside the nasal passages. For mild symptoms, daily nonsedating, or second-generation, antihistamine can be effective.

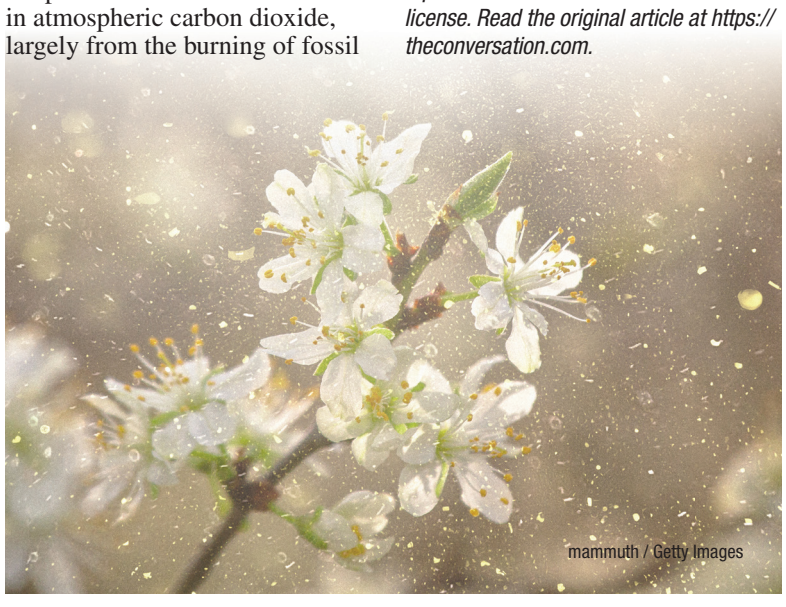
Daily use of nasal steroids can be helpful for people with moderate to severe allergies, but they can take several weeks to reach peak effect. A nasal antihistamine spray can provide additional benefits.

Antihistamine eye drops can also be helpful. In a dry climate like Colorado's, nasal dryness can contribute to congestion, so using nasal hydration such as saline sprays can ease symptoms.

If medications don't help, you could speak with an allergist about the possibility of immunotherapy – allergy shots – but they require weekly and monthly shots over several years. While allergy shots are effective at reducing allergy symptoms and the need for medications, they do have side effects, such as local site reactions and asthma symptoms, and they may trigger a severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis.

Allergies can be miserable but manageable – even in an overproductive year like much of America is seeing in 2026. Understanding what's causing them and finding the right solutions for you can make it easier to enjoy those flowers and walks in the sunshine.

Levi Keller is an assistant professor of Medicine at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. This article is republished under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article at https://theconversation.com.



mammuth / Getty Images

‘A game changer’

New tech is reducing Parkinson’s symptoms in these patients

By MICHELLE MARCHANTE
Miami Herald (TNS)

Photos by Alie Skowronski / Miami Herald / TNS

Ozzie Echemendia, left, shows Ivonne Gonzalez an adjustment to her DBS (deep brain stimulation) device. Echemendia convinced Gonzalezto undergo DBS surgery, a minimally invasive brain intervention designed to reduce the effects of Parkinson’s disease. Echemendia explains that the device modifies the intensity of the electric current flowing through the brain.

MIAMI — Ozzie Echemendia’s “second chance of life” came in the form of a wire that runs from his brain all the way to his upper chest.

Echemendia is in a battle with Parkinson’s disease, a movement disorder that affects the nervous system and usually worsens over time, causing tremors and making it difficult to walk and speak. It wasn’t long ago that the 54-year-old father of two found himself on the couch, unable to work or even walk without help. He had frequent tremors. He could barely speak. He was taking 60 pills a day, on average.

“Parkinson’s steals. It doesn’t care what you owe to the bank. It doesn’t care about keeping the lights on or feeding your kids,” Echemendia, who lives in the Redland area of South Miami-Dade, told the Miami Herald during a recent video interview. “The fact that I’m here sitting with you, it’s a miracle.”

In May 2025, he underwent a minimally invasive brain surgery to implant a device in the area of the brain that largely controls movement and is connected to a battery implanted in his upper chest. Shortly after recovery, the “programming” started. Doctors began to touch and slide buttons on an iPad.

At first, there was no change. By the third try, Echemendia began to move.

“They hit the bull’s-eye,” Echemendia said. Within a few days, he was able to walk to the bathroom by himself for the first time in years.

He’s still undergoing treatment for Parkinson’s, a disorder that currently has no cure. But he’s working again. Dancing. Walking.

“I can’t describe – words can’t describe now the change,” Echemendia said, tearing up. It “was a game changer for me, a life changer.”

What sounds like a miracle is the effects of a deep brain stimulation procedure Echemendia underwent at Memorial Regional Hospital in Hollywood. The procedure, most commonly known as DBS, implants thin wires into a specific area of the brain that controls movement to “control the symptoms of Parkinson’s” and other movement-related disorders without medication, according to Dr. Christopher DeMassi, chief of the Memorial Neuroscience Institute. A small battery, similar to a pacemaker, is implanted in the chest.

“It’s almost like a light switch. You turn the device on, and they’re moving totally normal,” DeMassi said. “They’re able to walk. They get rid of their walker. They start eating. It’s a huge change in life.”

The tech has been around for decades but has been honed over time to no longer require patients to stay awake as doctors poke around in their brains. The robot-assisted surgery takes less than an hour to do compared to traditional DBS surgery, which can sometimes take up to 10 hours to complete, according to the hospital. And unlike traditional brain surgery, no head shaving is needed.

Those were key selling points for Ivonne Gonzalez, who underwent the procedure in late December after she was connected to Echemendia by his wife, her former co-worker. Gonzalez, who was diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 2022, said she realized something was wrong when her handwriting began to change. She struggled to walk. Her speech began to slur. It became difficult to play with her grandchildren.

Now, she’s walking without her walker. And her speech has improved, though she’s still in her own programming process.

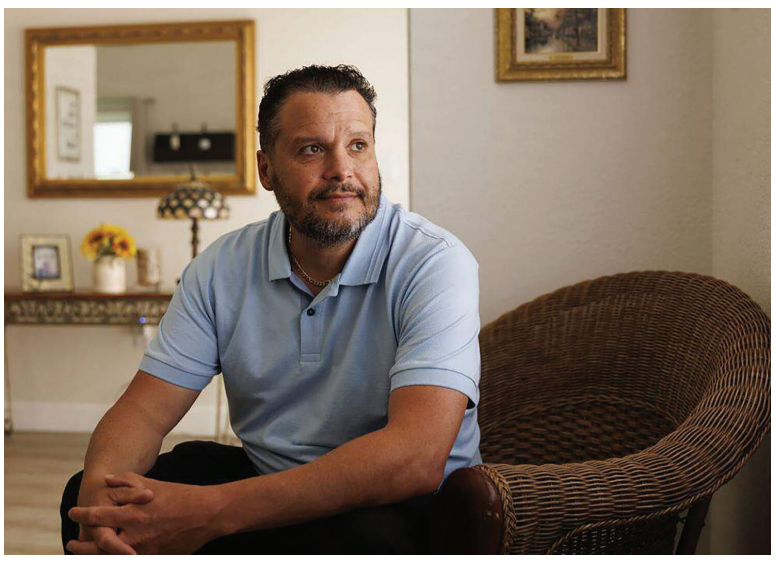
“People have to be their own advocates,” Gonzalez told the Herald, stressing how important it is to find a doctor who listens and pays attention to symptoms and other changes that patients notice in their life.

The robot-assisted DBS surgery is just one of the innovative technologies being used at South Florida hospitals to combat the difficult symptoms of a life-changing disorder that affects nearly 1 million people in the country.

How ultrasounds are being used to slow Parkinson’s

At Baptist Hospital, a similar – and newer – technology is being used to lessen Parkinson’s unbearable tremors, without the need for anesthesia. The MRI-guided procedure uses high-intensity focused ultrasounds to burn and kill the tremor-causing cells, according to Dr. Justin Sporrer, the director of functional neurosurgery at Baptist Health’s Miami Neuroscience Institute.

Ivonne Gonzalez holds her DBS (deep brain stimulation) device that changes the intensity of the electric current that’s running through the brain on April 28 in Miami.



Ozzie Echemendia was bedridden, had lost 59 pounds and could barely speak at his worst point. After the DBS surgery a year ago, he says, “I was reborn.”

There are no stitches. No implanted devices. Patients go home the same day. And the effects are instantaneous.

“It was a miracle. I literally started crying,” said Timothy Sick of Fort Lauderdale, who for six years and two months lived with tremors. “I came out of the machine. My hand didn’t quiver at all, and [the doctor] high-fived me.”

No two Parkinson’s patients are the same. The disease affects every patient’s body differently, similar to cancer. It’s why treatment is so difficult.

In Sick’s case, his “tremor dominant” Parkinson’s wasn’t responding well to medication, making it difficult to work. He and his partner Sal Zambito went everywhere – 48 different specialists from London to Boston to Miami – looking for a treatment that could bring some sense of normalcy back.

They found it at Baptist. Just like DBS, the high-intensity focused ultrasound procedure commonly referred to as HIFU is approved by federal regulators to treat patients with essential tremors and Parkinson’s and is often covered by insurance.

“A year ago, I couldn’t even get out of bed, and we had medicine, adjustments, more physical therapy,” the 66-year-old Sick said. “And then when the procedure came, I like, hopped out of bed.”

“I have my purpose in life again,” he added.

This type of procedure is for people whose symptoms, like tremors, are not responding well to medication, according to Sporrer.

Before his procedure began, Sick remembers being asked to draw a swirl, following the lines on the page. It was difficult. His lines were shaky and all over the place. Shortly after the procedure began, he was asked to do it again. This time, he drew a near-perfect swirl.

“It was unreal. ... I literally just walked yesterday well over a mile,” Sick said in a recent interview. “I was lucky if I could walk 100 yards before with a cane and assistance from my partner.”

For neurologists like Sporrer, the goal is to improve the quality of life for patients with Parkinson’s disease, a condition that often worsens with time and, while not deadly on its own, is known to contribute to a shorter lifespan.

With HIFU, patients are awake for the procedure and undergo tests so Sporrer can monitor the effects and make adjustments as needed. “The tremor is gone” before the patient leaves the procedure table, the doctor said.

Each side of the brain is done nine months apart to minimize the risk of side effects. Patients need to shave their head and wear a large helmet-looking device with what Sick describes as a “water balloon to keep your head from getting too hot.”

“The hard part of this procedure really is identifying those [tremor-causing] cells, and we do that with an MRI,” Sporrer said, explaining that the MRI gives them a picture of the brain. Then comes the ultrasound.

“The beauty of ultrasound is that we can heat up those cells a little bit at first without causing damage yet, and so basically we’re temporarily turning those neurons off to see what the effect is going to be,” he added. “It’s a little test drive.”

While every patient differs, most report significant tremor reductions, the doctor said. Some become tremor free. Sick is now waiting to do the procedure on the other half of his brain.

Baptist Health South Florida, the region’s largest not-for-profit health system, plans to expand its neuroscience division within the next five years, increasing to over 90 physicians at the Baptist Health Miami Neuroscience Institute at Baptist Hospital in Kendall.

“The community is hungry for care and hungry for appropriate care” as Miami-Dade’s population continues to age, said Dr. Diego Torres-Russotto, chair of neurology and the distinguished endowed chair in neurology at Baptist Health Miami Neuroscience Institute.

Parkinson’s stem cell trial is underway at UM

At the University of Miami, neurologists are testing AI’s capabilities to shuffle through patient data to spot patterns that can help predict which patients may experience rapid decline. The hope is that the data will help doctors determine effective treatment options faster to reduce worsening disease advancement.

One of those potential treatments: stem cells.

The university is involved in an ongoing clinical trial testing whether lab-created stem cells can replace critical movement-related cells that tend to disappear in the brains of moderate to advanced Parkinson’s patients, lessening the disease’s effect. The job of those disappearing neurons is to release dopamine, which most people know as the “feel good” hormone that helps regulate mood. But dopamine is also key to speech and movement.

“Dopamine unlocks movement. Without it, you stay stiff and slow and potentially shake,” said Dr. Ihtsham Haq, a neurology professor and chief of the movement disorder division at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

Haq said most existing Parkinson’s treatments focus on reducing the disease’s debilitating symptoms. This stem cell therapy, on the other hand, tries to fix one of the factors that can trigger the disease, potentially helping to restore motor and other functions.

And initial trial results are promising, according to BlueRock Therapeutics, the company behind the trial of the investigational cell therapy bemdaneprocel. UM’s medical school, which previously served as a surgical site to inject patients with the stem cells, has enrolled its own participants for the next phase of the trial, which will be recruiting over 100 patients across 37 medical centers in the country.

Haq describes the experimental procedure as a minimally invasive brain surgery, where a small piece of a patient’s skull is removed, the stem cells are injected into their brain and the hole is closed. The patient usually stays overnight for monitoring before being discharged.

The goal is to help reduce the symptoms of patients with moderate to severe symptoms whose medication is no longer working well while the search for a cure continues.

“We’re in a situation where no kind of Parkinson’s is curable, but I think that’s going to change,” Haq said.

“There’s more research in this direction then there ever was before,” he added.

FINANCE

Nathan Howard / Getty Images / TNS

In an aerial view, an Amazon Web Services data center is shown situated near single-family homes on July 17, 2024, in Stone Ridge, Virginia.

Data centers use lots of electricity. Should we be worried?

Here are 5 key issues

By BRYCE GRAY
St. Louis Post-Dispatch (TNS)

Data center proposals across the country are stoking wide-ranging questions and concerns tied to their consumption of electric power.

The facilities store racks of computing equipment, in row after row, powering main features of modern technology, especially artificial intelligence.

Keeping that machinery humming can consume as much electricity as entire cities – adding up to potentially spark one of the biggest transformations to U.S. power demand since the rise of widespread air conditioning.

We previously looked at the water consumption of data centers. Now, here are key issues related to electricity:

How much energy do they use?

Data centers can use a power grid-altering amount of electricity. Some facilities can guzzle as much energy as 100,000 homes, said Lauren Withycombe Keeler, a professor at Arizona State University's School for the Future of Innovation in Society.

In places like northern Indiana, a data center campus for Amazon and Anthropic, the AI developer, is estimated to require as much electricity as 1 million-plus homes, according to multiple reports. That project is part of a data center push in Indiana that, by 2030, could see a handful of sites use more power than all 6.8 million households in the state, says an overview from Indiana University.

Collectively, data centers already consume a substantial – and growing – slice of the nation's electricity. A report from Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory found that by 2023, data centers accounted for about 4.4 percent of total U.S. electricity consumption – more than doubling the 1.9 percent the facilities used in 2018.

By 2028, the report estimated, data centers could use 6.7 percent to 12 percent of all U.S. electricity.

Much of that energy consumption comes from the nature of AI, which doesn't work in the same way as traditional computing. The computations for AI are remarkably hard, requiring trillions of inputs and outputs. The resulting output is essentially grown, not retrieved like something from an ordinary database. And the information is summoned based on the given prompt and range of possible answers.

"AI is just a fundamentally hard computation. You have to do lots of math," said Alex Newkirk, a researcher with the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. "That's why they need dedicated hardware."

The hardware requirements explain the need for more large data centers. And that creates the need for lots of electricity for power but also to cool all the machinery.

The expected large use from data centers is helping drive national energy trends, alongside other forces, like electric vehicles and heating systems. Forecasts for overall electricity demand call for a significant increase in coming years after a decades-long plateau that leaps in technology and efficiency made possible.

For instance, national electricity use is expected to grow by 1 percent this year and 3 percent in 2027, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Should that pan out, it would mark the first time since 2007 that demand has risen in four consecutive years.

Relatively few power plants were built over the nation's prolonged period of flat demand. But the appetite for more of the "baseload" power they provide has been reawakened amid the push for data centers. That has delayed some plant retirements and caused Missouri and other states to dust off ambitions to build new nuclear plants for the first time in decades.

For example, at a statewide nuclear summit last year that attracted political, energy and business leaders, Missouri Gov. Mike Kehoe expressed urgent support for the energy source, saying "nuclear technology can be a critical piece" in powering the state's future. And Ameren, the St. Louis-based power utility, has cited "large-load customers" like data centers as a chief catalyst for reshuffling its long-term plans; it now aims to get 40 percent of its energy from nuclear power, 30 percent from gas and 30 percent from renewables by the 2040s.

"The era of flat load growth is over for a variety of reasons," said Newkirk. "But AI is a big one."

Where do they get the power?

How data centers get power varies by facility, depending on their location and the regional electric grid. And some data center operators are exploring ways to run their own power sources.

Data center developers say that figuring out how to power the facilities is the tallest hurdle they face.

"Power is the single biggest constraint on data center development in the United States, and has been for years," Bob Clark, the executive chairman of Clayco – whose affiliate, CRG, is a major developer of the facilities – said in an email to the Post-Dispatch.

Project developers and electric grid operators don't just face questions about how to procure the power but also how to move it to where it's needed.

"The challenge is both generation and transmission," said Clark, who mentioned that transmission capacity is at the top of the list of topics discussed often with Ameren. "Decades of flat electricity demand led to underinvesting in the grid, and the infrastructure is now catching up."

Often, data center projects gravitate to where they can get a steady supply of cheap power. For example, the abundance of hydropower has helped make the middle of Washington state a hotbed for data centers. And major ones in northwest Indiana could stand to take advantage of Illinois' nation-leading output of nuclear power, plus the lower taxes offered in the Hoosier State.

The proposed projects around St. Louis are typically focused on sites near large transmission lines and substations, poised to draw from the region's broader power grid that is heavily reliant on coal.

For instance, in Montgomery County, Missouri – where data centers for both Google and Amazon are proposed – a local economic development group has touted access to the largest electrical substation in the state. And in Festus, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis where CRG aims to build a large data center project, Clark points to a sizable transmission line as a key draw.

What are the environmental concerns?

Top environmental concerns hinge on the climate implications and greenhouse gas emissions that would accompany buildouts of fossil-fuel power generation, whether from new gas plants or the extended use of coal plants.

But design strategies and technological innovations also stand to trim the energy requirements for data centers.

Cooling, as a dominant use of energy at the facilities, is a main target for those efficiencies. The most efficient forms of cooling typically use water to whisk heat away from the equipment; the water is often circulated in looped systems that run through chillers.

Nvidia – the dominant producer of the chips for AI – recently announced that its newest generation of chips could be cooled with water as hot as 113 degrees.

At that temperature, "no water chillers are necessary for data centers," said Jensen Huang, Nvidia's CEO, when he described the new chips at a January event. "We're basically cooling this supercomputer with hot water. It is so incredibly efficient."

Still, experts caution that the scale and proliferation of the facilities could diminish those gains.

But in a best-case scenario, they say, the moment can be harnessed into much-needed upgrades to the grid and to accelerate clean technologies – all or mostly paid by data center operators.

"If these guys can foot the bill ... that's a great outcome for everybody," said Jackson Morris, a director with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

On that note, Clark, of Clayco, pointed to commitments for clean energy from data center companies, as well as investments in renewable energy from Ameren. The utility, while still leaning into new natural gas plants, plans to also ramp up its renewable power in coming years.

"Anyone who wants clean energy investment in Missouri should welcome" data centers, Clark said.

What are the transparency complaints?

In multiple communities around St. Louis, local residents have voiced frustration about the lack of transparency in data center proposals. Nondisclosure agreements can block key details, including the identity of operators and the anticipated water and power requirements.

Nationally, the opacity has often extended to the whereabouts of major AI data centers. For example, there's no comprehensive dataset about who owns what facilities, and where they're located. Some groups have resorted to studying satellite imagery to assess development of facilities that look like advanced data centers – gleaning clues like counting the number of industrial chillers on rooftops.

Others insist that more data is needed about the facilities' energy usage as well as other key metrics like water consumption.

"It all gets back to transparency," said Eric Masanet, an engineering professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara who studies data centers. "You can't manage what you don't measure."

Do electric bills go up?

The short answer is maybe.

Big power users like data centers could help push prices higher in different ways. One key factor is increased power demand. That can be influenced by the types of power generation that are serving that demand.

Forecasts from the U.S. Energy Information Administration say that if power demand grows faster than expected in the near future, it would result in higher wholesale electricity prices, which stand to be passed on to consumers, especially in areas relying on gas and coal plants.

Jumps in electricity prices would vary from place to place. The hikes could be steeper in places like Texas, which has limited connections to power grids in other regions.

The prospect of higher prices has helped give rise to a slogan – coined BeYONCE, like the singer – encouraging data center developers to "Bring Your Own New Clean Energy" to the table. The goal is to coax new, low-cost generation onto the grid, from sources like wind and solar, to reduce electricity prices for customers. Locally, attorney and developer Jim Onder is proposing a $2 billion project in Ferguson, Missouri, to build a clean energy data center on the former Emerson campus.

Another factor that can affect customers' bills are infrastructure costs – the price of building out the electric grid. Many places have yet to establish rules about such costs and who pays for them.

In Columbus, Ohio, for example, local officials have pointed to data center construction as a key reason for residential bills increasing about $20 monthly, as customers absorb hikes in both base rates and transmission rates.

Missouri has recently formed rules for how to handle costs tied to "large-load" customers of its biggest utilities, like Ameren, and to shield customers from negative impacts – especially if a major power user were to suddenly move or go out of business after significant investments were made.

To avoid having customers shoulder costs in such a scenario, Missouri officials have adopted certain rates for big customers, along with conditions to ensure that they cannot easily or quickly abandon their deals with electric utilities.

The prevailing agreement for Ameren's territory won support from many parties, including Google, Amazon, the Sierra Club and the utility itself. There was a notable holdout, however, as the Office of Public Counsel – a state office that argues on behalf of ratepayers – did not sign the agreement.

Prospective developers of local data center projects have pointed to those rules while aiming to allay concerns about costs.

"Under Missouri law, data centers must pay for the infrastructure they require," Clark, the Clayco chief, told the Post-Dispatch. "New transformers, substations, and transmission upgrades get built without shifting costs to residential customers."

FOOD

Build better bowls during National Salad Month

By KRISTEN WOOD

This May marks the 34th anniversary of National Salad Month, a yearly reminder that salads deserve more credit. With the right balance of ingredients, they can be crisp, flavorful and well balanced. Here's how to build one you'll actually crave.

The story behind National Salad Month

National Salad Month is a chance to rethink everyday meals and prioritize fresh, nutrient-dense ingredients. As the weather warms, lighter, more refreshing dishes have more appeal, and salads are an easy go to.

Established in 1992 by the Association for Dressings & Sauces, the initiative shows how far salads have come. Once relegated to a simple side, they have levelled up into hearty grain bowls and globally inspired combinations. At its core, National Salad Month is an invitation to break routine and build meals that feel as exciting as they are nourishing.

The salad boom

Salads are gaining popularity as more consumers prioritize health. According to a YouGov study, 40 percent of Americans report eating salad at least a few times per week. In response, fast-casual chains like Sweetgreen and Cava have built their appeal around customizable, build-your-own bowls, while traditional fast-food brands are expanding their menus with more substantial options. At Chick-fil-A, for example, the Cobb Salad is positioned as a full entree rather than a side.

Clear health benefits also drive the momentum, with diets rich in vegetables consistently linked to better overall health. According to the American Cancer Society, a higher fiber intake can reduce the risk of certain cancers, including colorectal and breast cancer. Even dressing plays a role: fats from ingredients like mayonnaise can help the body absorb carotenoids, antioxidants found in carrots and leafy greens. Altogether, salads are a practical and enjoyable way to eat more of what your body needs.

Ditch the salad kits

Grandview Research projects the global packaged salad market to rise from $14.29 billion in 2025 to $25.97 billion by 2033. This increase shows the importance consumers place on convenience, particularly when it comes to healthier eating options. However, convenience comes with drawbacks. Many store-bought kits contain excess sodium, preservatives and heavy dressings that take away the freshness they promise.

Making your own salad is easier than it seems and far more rewarding, giving you full control over ingredients, portions and flavor. Instead of reaching for a prepackaged Southwest salad kit, build it yourself with fresh greens, black beans, corn and a creamy dressing for a fresher, better-tasting meal.

The secret to a delicious salad

Every great salad begins with a solid foundation. Leafy greens, like spinach, arugula and romaine, serve as the base. Add whole grains like quinoa or brown rice to make the salad more filling. Protein is just as important, and it doesn't always have to mean grilled chicken. Options like a halloumi salad, salmon, tofu and chickpeas all bring richness and depth to the bowl. By combining greens, grains and protein, you create a balanced base ready to be upgraded into a nourishing, delicious meal.

Layer flavor, color and texture

Once your base is set, it's time to build upward. A colorful salad is usually nutritionally diverse, so try to include a variety of vegetables, such as cucumbers, shredded carrots and roasted shishito peppers. Fruits like berries, apples or citrus can also add a refreshing contrast.

Balance is key when it comes to texture and flavor. Nuts, tortilla strips or crispy onions bring a satisfying crunch, while creamy ingredients like avocado and crumbled feta add richness. Finish it off with extras like olives, bacon bits or dried cranberries to add depth and variety. The goal is a well-balanced mix that keeps every bite interesting.

Upgrade your dressing game

Dressing is what brings a salad together, and it does not have to come from a bottle. Homemade versions are easier than they seem and can be made in batches for the week. A simple vinaigrette with olive oil, vinegar, mustard and honey is a reliable starting point.

From there, look to different cuisines for inspiration. Try a sesame-ginger dressing or a creamy miso-lemon blend for an Asian-inspired twist. The key is balance; a good dressing should complement your ingredients, not overpower them.

It's time to become a salad master

Building a great salad is a skill worth having. Once you know the formula, you can pull together a fresh, satisfying bowl in minutes. It works just as well for a quick lunch as it does for a party dish worth sharing. This National Salad Month, skip the pre-packaged kits and start making your own salads. You might be surprised at how quickly it becomes something you genuinely look forward to eating.

Kristen Wood is an award-winning photographer, food writer, recipe developer and certified functional nutrition expert. She is also the creator of MOON and spoon and yum, a vegetarian food blog, and the author of "Vegetarian Family Cookbook," "Fermented Hot Sauce Cookbook" and "Hot Sauce Cookbook for Beginners." Her work has appeared in various online and print publications, including NBC, Seattle Times, ABC, Elle, Fox, CBS, Forbes, Chicago Sun-Times and more.

3 dishes make the most of early finds at farmers markets

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

May brings so many things we dream of during a long and dreary Pittsburgh winter: sunny skies, T-shirt weather, the excitement of the Pittsburgh Marathon and Mother's Day celebrations.

It also ushers in the local farmers market season, expanding the supply of fresh produce, homemade breads and desserts, organic meats, cheeses and wide array of prepared foods that support local businesses.

Perennial favorites include the Original Farmers Market in South Fayette, which got its start as the Allegheny County Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association in 1919 and blasted its opening horn for the first time this season recently. The Bloomfield Saturday Market also expanded operations from its smaller bimonthly winter market to a full-fledged open-air community market with more than three dozen vendors on May 2.

CitiParks Farmers Markets – which operates four markets across the city – kicks off its new season on May 10 in Squirrel Hill with a wide variety of local products and the popular Food Bucks program. Offered in partnership with Just Harvest, it distributes a $2 voucher for fresh fruits and vegetables for every $5 of SNAP purchases at participating retail locations.

The only downside is that you might not know what to make with all the bounty you bring home.

If a big bunch of tender, local spinach ends up in your bag, a pasta dish that combines the nutrient-rich green with ricotta cheese and heavy cream can't be beat. It comes together quickly, appeals to kids and with the addition of lemon, puts a fresh spin on a quick Italian-ish dinner.

Looking for a big bowl of plant-based protein that can survive a trip to the office for a not-so-sad desk lunch? Greens and beans made with Tuscan or curly kale – another early farm market find – is an easy, skillet-friendly dish that is both economical and nutritiously packed with antioxidants and fiber.

We also have a sweet suggestion for dessert using a tangy, crunchy vegetable some consider old-fashioned but actually adds a great seasonal flavor to everything from cocktails and salads to pies and crisps: rhubarb. Martha Stewart's "dump and whisk" rhubarb Bundt cake is nothing short of a marvel. Olive oil and whipped egg whites give it a light, fluffy texture that's reminiscent of a cake doughnut, and she also adds lemon for a citrusy tang. And the pan is coated in sanding sugar for a crunchy, sparkling bite.

Creamy Spinach Pasta
Serves 4

This simple recipe calls for long, flat ribbons of pasta such as tagliatelle or fettuccine. I used whole-milk ricotta, but you could substitute part-skim if you're looking to cut down on fat. Toasting the pine nuts might seem like an extra step, but it really enhances their flavor.

3/4 cup ricotta cheese
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, divided
Pinch red pepper flakes
3/4 pound tagliatelle or fettuccine
1/2 cup pine nuts
4 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 pound baby spinach leaves
1 cup heavy cream or half-and-half
Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg
Grated Parmesan cheese, for serving

In large bowl, combine ricotta with salt and pepper to taste. Add a pinch of red pepper flakes, stir to combine and set aside.

Bring a large pot of water to boil. Add 2 tablespoons of salt and return to rolling boil. Add pasta and cook until al dente according to package directions. Reserve 1 cup cooking water.

While pasta cooks, prepare sauce. In a 12-inch skillet over medium heat, toast pine nuts until they are fragrant and golden brown, stirring occasionally so they do not burn, about 3 minutes. Remove and set aside.

Add butter to pan and melt over medium-low heat. Add garlic and saute until pale golden, about 2 minutes. Add spinach and cook until it wilts, about 4 minutes more.

Add cream or half-and-half, bring to simmer and cook until sauce begins to thicken slightly, about 2 minutes. Season with salt, pepper and nutmeg.

Scoop pasta directly into skillet and toss to combine. Add pasta and spinach mixture to bowl of ricotta off heat and toss to coat, adding ¼ cup pasta water (or more, if needed) to loosen up the sauce.

Place pasta in bowls and sprinkle with pine nuts. Season with additional salt and pepper or pepper flakes, if desired. Pass grated Parmesan at the table.

Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

Kale with White Beans, Tomato and Parmesan
Serves 4

Quick and healthy, this stovetop dish needs only a few ingredients to make it shine. Be sure to trim the tough and woody stems off the leaves before chopping them into bite-sized pieces to improve the texture of the dish.

I added grape tomatoes, fresh lemon juice and a touch of cream for a velvety finish. If you don't care for kale, substitute Swiss chard or spinach.

1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
1 small shallot, diced
2 small garlic cloves, minced
1 1/2-2 cups Lacinato or curly kale, ribs removed, finely chopped
1 cup grape tomatoes, sliced in half
Juice of 1 lemon
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano, or to taste
Pinch of crushed red pepper flakes, or to taste
Sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper, to taste
1 (15-ounce) can white cannellini beans, drained and rinsed well
3 tablespoons chicken or vegetable broth
3 tablespoons heavy cream or half-and-half
3 tablespoons grated Parmesan, plus more for serving
Lemon wedges, for serving, optional

Heat a large pan over medium heat and add olive oil and onion. Cook for 2-3 minutes, until onion is softened. Add garlic and cook another 1-2 minutes, until fragrant.

Add kale, tomatoes and lemon juice. Season with oregano, crushed red pepper and salt and pepper, to taste. Give it a good toss, and cook until everything is heated through, about 1 minute.

Add drained white beans, chicken broth and heavy cream or half-and-half. Stir until well combined and simmer for 10 minutes.

Stir in grated Parmesan, taste and, if needed, season again with salt and/or pepper to taste.

Serve in warmed bowls with crusty bread for scooping and extra Parmesan for sprinkling.

Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

Rhubarb Lemon Bundt Cake

Rhubarb makes a great filling for a crisp or pie if you add enough sugar to counterbalance its tartness. But the tangy, crunchy vegetable also can add a wonderful flavor to cake. Served with a cup of coffee, it also makes a nice breakfast.

1 1/4 cups extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for pan
Sanding or sparkling sugar, for pan
2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
1/2 cup fine yellow cornmeal
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 1/4 teaspoons kosher salt
3 large eggs, separated
1 1/4 cups plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
2 teaspoons pure vanilla paste or extract
2 teaspoons grated lemon zest, plus 1/4 cup fresh juice (from 1 or 2 lemons)
8 ounces rhubarb, cut into a 1/2-inch dice (2 cups)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Brush a 10-to-15-cup Bundt pan with oil; generously sprinkle with sanding sugar to fully coat (do not tap out excess).

In a large bowl, whisk together flour, cornmeal, baking powder, baking soda, and salt.

In another bowl, whisk together oil, egg yolks, 1 cup granulated sugar, vanilla and lemon zest and juice. In a third bowl, beat egg whites on low until foamy.

Increase speed to medium-high and gradually add 1/4 cup granulated sugar, beating until stiff, glossy peaks form.

Stir oil mixture into flour mixture just to combine. Stir ⅓ of egg-white mixture into batter, then gently fold in remaining egg-white mixture just until no streaks remain. (Do not overmix.)

Toss rhubarb with remaining 2 tablespoons granulated sugar to evenly coat. Fold rhubarb mixture into batter, then transfer to pan; smooth top with a spatula.

Bake until cake is golden brown on top and a wooden skewer inserted into center comes out clean, 45-50 minutes (if top is browning too quickly, tent with foil).

Let cool in pan on a wire rack 20 minutes, then invert onto a plate or stand and let cool completely before slicing and serving.

Cake is best served the day it's baked, but can also be stored in an airtight container at room temperature up to 2 days.

marthastewart.com

British singer Ali Campbell performs with the reggae group UB40 during a concert of The Hits Tour at the Ziggo Dome in Amsterdam, Netherlands, on April 2, 2024.
Marcel Krijgsman / ANP / AFP / Getty Images / TNS

For Ali Campbell of UB40, the roots of reggae grew in Birmingham, England

By PETER LARSEN
The Orange County Register (TNS)

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Picture the London punk scene in 1978: The Clash are singing of a city aflame, the Sex Pistols are somehow getting more popular after imploding on tour, and on every street corner, mohawks and safety pins are on rebellious display.

Meanwhile, in a poor neighborhood in Birmingham, 120 miles northeast, eight young men, many of them teens, are learning how to play the guitars, bass and drums they just acquired.

Oh, but playing reggae, not punk.

"We grew up listening to reggae," says Ali Campbell, the founding singer-guitarist of the English band UB40. "All our neighbors were Windrush children," he says of the generation of Caribbean immigrants invited to come help the United Kingdom rebuild after the war.

"They were Caribbean or Jamaican, West Indian," he says. "Asian. I grew up with [Indian singer] Asha Bhosle as well. But the music of the streets was reggae, you know."

Like punk, reggae was an outsider's music in Balsall Heath, where Campbell and his bandmates grew up.

"It was a red-light district where I grew up," he says. "The wrong side of the tracks. There was a lot of shebeens [unlicensed bars] and blues parties in our area.

"As a child, as a 10-year-old or whatever, I'd hang around the blues parties and the shebeens to get the rice and curry goat juice that would be leftover at night."

And all around Balsall Heath, the sounds of reggae echoed from apartment windows, pool hall jukeboxes, and portable soundsystems.

"I'd be exposed to Eric Donaldson's 'Cherry Oh Baby' and all the great reggae that was happening at the time on all the jukeboxes in the cafes that we frequented because we used to play pinball," Campbell says.

"You know, that's how I learned 'Red Red Wine' by Tony Tribe," he says of the Jamaican cover version of a Neil Diamond song that became a hit for UB40 in the mid-'80s. "Nobody was more surprised than us to find that Neil Diamond had written it."

In an interview edited for length and clarity, Campbell talked about the band's bestselling 1980 debut, how Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders discovered UB40, and how the multiracial reggae group was initially accepted more in Jamaica than at home.

Q: Tell me about "Signing Off," the band's first album, recorded just months after forming the band.

A: We wanted to do [covers] as our first album, but we were talked out of it. Because in 1980, you were just getting over punk, and everybody wrote their own stuff. So we were convinced that we should write our own album.

We'd only been going for six months, and in that six months we'd "acquired" our instruments because we couldn't afford to buy them. We were all on the dole, 7.60 pounds a week, so yeah, basically we nicked them.

We learned to play them by listening to a Sly and Robbie record that we just copied piecemeal. And then we wrote our first album, called "Signing Off," because we were signing off the dole. All in six months.

Q: That's amazingly fast.

A: And then we had our first hit. Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders discovered us, really. She was No. 1 with "Brass in Pocket" at the time, and she was looking for someone to support the Pretenders on a 35-day tour around England. We'd only done about a dozen gigs in pubs up until that point, she saw us in the Rock Garden in London.

Asked us if we'd go on tour and we went, "Yeah!" [He laughs] That was it. We released our first single, and that went to No. 3, I think it was, and that was the start of us having hits.

Q: Was that "Food for Thought"? Or "King"?

A: It was both. A double A-side. We weren't very savvy business-wise, so we put two of our best songs on one single.

Q: I listened to that album again yesterday, and it's still great. It's also quite political for a first record by young guys like you were.

A: We wrote the song "King" about Martin Luther King. We wrote the song ["Tyler'] about Gary Tyler from Louisiana, who was wrongly arrested and put in jail. We did a song about South Africa called "Burden of Shame."

"Food for Thought," we made a couple of years before Live Aid. But really, "Skin and bones is creeping, doesn't know he's dead / Ancient eyes are peeping, from his infant head [He sings], it's about famine, it's about children starving to death while we celebrate Christmas with food.

It was a pretty political album. We felt that we had a platform, we should use it responsibly and say some stuff that we all felt strongly about, you know.

Q: And it did very well.

A: Oh, it was No. 2 in England. Went on to sell 8 million copies, which is ridiculous for eight guys from Balsall Heath. That's more than "Kind of Blue" sold. Miles Davis and John Coltrane, the two great musicians of our time, and we outsold them with "Signing Off," which to us was just absurd.

Q: Your next album, "Present Arms," had the unemployment song, "One in Ten," on it, and that did very well, too.

A: We decided we'd show people what dub [a slowed, reverb-heavy reggae style] was. We loved dub, and we wanted to popularize dub. "Present Arms" went to No. 2 in the charts. We thought, This is the perfect time to do "Present Arms in Dub" to show people what dub was.

People brought it back in droves, saying it was faulty. [He laughs] Because our demographic was sort of blue-collared housewives, you know. They brought it back to the shops saying, 'It's faulty. There's no vocals on it, and there's all these echoes on it and stuff.'

So it wasn't the great success we thought it would be. But it was the first dub album to ever get into the main [English] charts. That's something to be proud of.

Q: "Labour of Love" in 1983 was a huge hit with "Red Red Wine," "Cherry Oh Baby," "Johnny Too Bad," and more. Did you have any idea how popular it would become?

A: High expectations, really, because we love those songs so much. We were convinced that if people heard them they were going to love them, too. And they did. We had big hits, the first volume, and then there's "Labour of Love II." Fifteen hits or something.

Q: Did the broader reggae community accept UB40 in England and the Caribbean?

A: Not in England we weren't, but in Jamaica, we were. Because Jamaicans always found us very novel and loved the stuff we were doing. There was a bit of racism in England about it. The fact that I was White and my brother was White. But you've got to remember that we're a multi-racial band.

There was Astro, who was a Jamaican rasta, and Earl [Falconer], the bass player, who was Jamaican. We had an Arab. If you had taken eight people from Balsall Heath, where we came from, they'd have looked like us. They'd have been Indian and Arab, a couple of West Indians, a couple of White kids. So yeah, we never had any problems in Jamaica.

Q: It was often white kids in college who had the Bob Marley albums, reggae albums, and liked to smoke weed.

A: Yeah, the weed connection. We took Burning Spear on our first European tour, basically in Germany and places like that. And the audience was all white, but in red, gold and green jumpsuits and red, gold and green hats and everything. They were the ones that were digging reggae.

Q: After this tour, what do you have coming?

A: I've got an anthology coming out at some point, which is like my favorite songs. It's like a "Labour of Love" for me. Songs that I'm particularly proud of. And I'm also doing some new stuff. You've heard of Bitty McLean?

Q: I'm not sure.

A: He started off as a tape-op in our studios. We took him straight from college and made him an engineer in our studios. We did a demo with him, me and a guy called Patrick Tenyue, who is a trumpet player. We went off on tour and when we came back, Bitty was No. 2 in the charts with the song that we've made with him. "It's raining, it's raining, tears from my eyes." [He sings]

I introduced Bitty to Sly and Robbie, and I produced an album called "Respect," which was Sly and Robbie and Bitty singing Otis Redding songs. It never got released because the record company was stupid. But they [Sly and Robbie] loved him.

For the last few years, Sly has been sending drum beats over to Bitty in England, and some of these beats, you've never heard anything like them. I think because Sly, he wasn't doing the beats for anything, he was just experimenting. [Bassist Robbie Shakespeare died in 2021; Sly Dunbar died in January this year]

So we're putting songs on top of these beats at the moment. We've got five and they are so exciting. I can't wait for people to hear them because it's like it's reggae, but it's not reggae as you know it.

MOVIE REVIEW

Courtesy Focus Features / TNS

Inde Navarrette, left, and Michael Johnston in the movie "Obsession."

'Obsession' a cautionary tale told with dark and dread-filled flair

By KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service (TNS)

As young men flinched and gasped around me at the Los Angeles premiere of "Obsession," I almost had to laugh. A slight head tilt, creepy smile or strange movement from star Inde Navarrette was enough to make them jump, and I had the realization that the most terrifying thing for a young man these days is an emotionally unregulated and unpredictable woman. Keep that one in your back pocket, ladies.

The theory bore out at the end of the film when the guy next to me admitted to his date, "that's the scariest thing for me … girls." The young man behind "Obsession," 26-year-old filmmaker Curry Barker, has certainly tapped into that unique fear with his splashy breakout horror film. "Obsession" is his second feature, arriving hot on the heels of his self-distributed film "Milk & Serial," an outgrowth of the sketch comedy and horror shorts he's been making for YouTube, with collaborator Cooper Tomlinson, who co-stars in "Obsession."

Written, directed and edited by Barker, "Obsession" comes from a simple, familiar premise, executed with a dark and dread-filled flair. Barker combines the monkey's paw and Pygmalion myths in this story of a young man who wishes that his dream girl would fall in love with him. You know what they say about love spells (don't do them), and the way it unfolds in Barker's vision is bleak, bloody and seriously disturbing.

Our unlucky simp is Bear (Michael Johnston), one of a quartet of early-20-something friends who work at a music store and get drunk at trivia as often as possible. It's clear from the start that even though Bear is crushing on Nikki (Navarrette), it's actually Sarah (Megan Lawless) who has feelings for Bear, while Ian (Tomlinson), his best friend, weirdly undermines his efforts with Nikki any chance he gets.

Hoping to confess his feelings and win her over, Bear buys Nikki a trinket at a head shop, a One Wish Willow, though the clerk warns him he can't return with any complaints. After a disastrous conversation, Bear ends up making the wish himself, breaking the stick and wishing that Nikki would love him more than anyone else in the world, his caution obliterated by emotion.

'Obsession'

★★★

MPA rating: R (for strong bloody violence, grisly images, sexual content, pervasive language, and brief graphic nudity)

Running time: 1:48

How to watch: In theaters

For a brief moment, it's a sweet, cozy scenario, even though their friends are baffled by the new connection. But needy, possessive Nikki smothers Bear, and what plays out is a horrifying tale of obsessive love gone wrong – sour, curdled and violent. As her behavior becomes increasingly troubling and self-destructive, Bear realizes he's trapped in her jealous loop, the only way out through death.

The story isn't complicated, and it's one we know well, rendered with spooky, atmospheric aesthetics and intensely gnarly violence that provide cover for the thin premise, nagging plot holes and flimsy characterization in the script, which traffics in poorly explained archetypes. It's sufficient enough, but the strength of the filmmaking is not in the writing, but in Barker's command of style, pace and performance. Taylor Clemons' cinematography is excellent, all slow creeping shots and shadows permeating even the daytime scenes. An eerie, enchanting score by Rock Burwell giving the proceedings a dreamy, nightmarish quality.

But it's the performances that elevate "Obsession" and give it a real sense of danger. Johnston carries the film and the emotional core, but Navarrette delivers the kind of instant classic horror performance that will surely traumatize Gen Z for years. Her hysterical grin sets your teeth on edge; she alternates between swiftness and stillness in her uncanny movement. Johnston plays poor Bear as a quivering mess wracked with guilt that this monster – who used to be his friend – is the result of his own terrible decision-making. You wanted a girlfriend? Here's "Freaky Nikki."

The smartest choice Barker makes is the inclusion of the moments where Nikki snaps out of it, briefly coming to, or pleading with Bear in her sleep to "kill her," reminding us that Nikki, as menacing as she is, never wanted this. The only villain here is Bear, or perhaps it's the social expectations that young men think they should just be able to have whomever they want. If anything, "Obsession" should serve as a cautionary tale – for boys. The way they reacted in the theater, it seems like it landed. Girls are scary, and don't you forget it.

MOVIE REVIEW

'Hit Me Hard and Soft' is a dazzling document of Billie Eilish

By ADAM GRAHAM
The Detroit News (TNS)

Short of being on stage with Billie Eilish or actually being Billie Eilish, the dazzling concert film (with a mouthful of a title) "Billie Eilish – Hit Me Hard and Soft: The Tour (Live in 3D)" is as close as you can get to the 24-year-old Grammy winning pop sensation.

"Titanic" filmmaker James Cameron, who shares directorial credit here with Eilish, uses fully immersive 3D technology to showcase Eilish's stage show behind her 2024 album "Hit Me Hard and Soft."

And it's not just the onstage action. Cameron and crew place cameras inside the road case in which Eilish is wheeled to the stage, so we can see her view as she peeks out into the crowd through a tiny view hole. There are cameras underneath the stage, catching Eilish shuffling around between stage positions in between songs. And there's the handheld camera Eilish wields on stage, which she points at audience members and holds high above her head, and at one point lays down on the stage and hovers over, singing "Bad Guy" directly into it as it – and thereby the audience – stares straight up at her.

It's technically audacious and totally absorbing filmmaking, and the use of 3D is so remarkably rendered it's like there's nothing at all between audience and performer. (The movie is absolutely worth seeing on the very best 3D screen possible.)

'Billie Eilish – Hit Me Hard And Soft: The Tour (Live In 3D)'

Grade: A

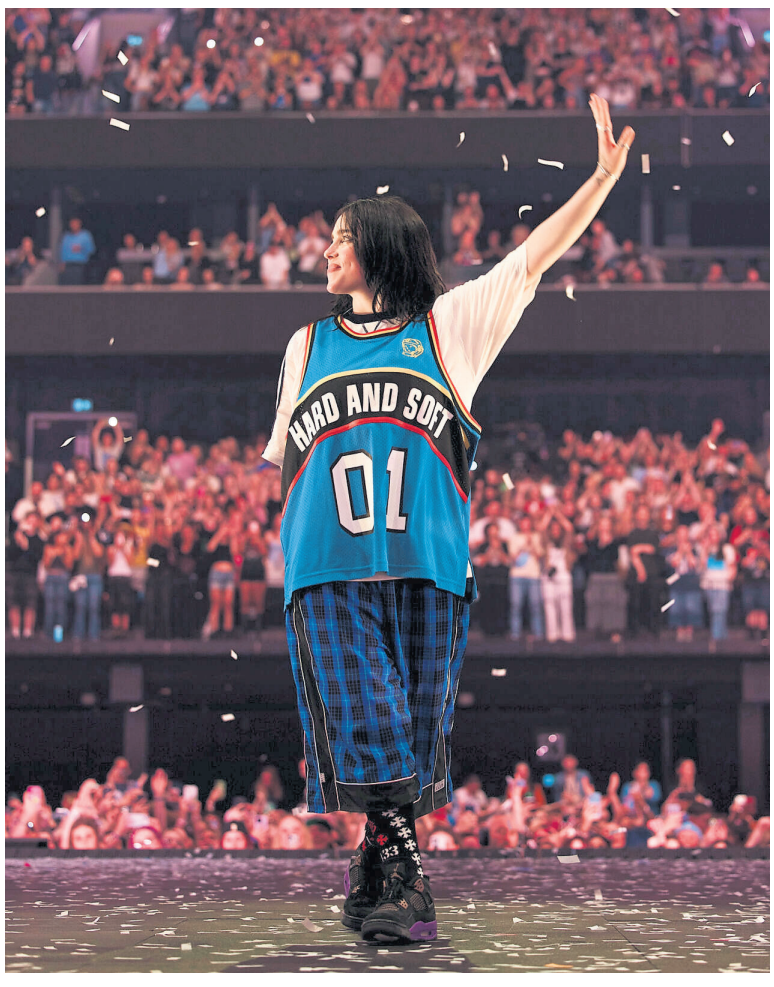
MPA rating: PG-13 (for strong language and suggestive references)

Running time: 1:54

How to watch: In theaters

Cameron also includes behind-the-scenes vignettes with Eilish, sometimes about her art and artistry, sometimes about petting dogs, and sometimes about the making of something viewers have just seen. To wit: viewers see show opener "Chihiro" and then immediately after they see how it was filmed, and the input Eilish had into helping to visualize the experience. Cameron listens to and fully respects her suggestions; he knows who's in charge.

It helps that Eilish is a dynamo performer and the stage show is a jaw-dropper. The movie's performance was captured at Manchester's Co-op Live (it's the same arena where Harry Styles' recent concert movie was filmed).



Henry Hwu / Paramount Pictures / TNS

Billie Eilish in "Billie Eilish – Hit Me Hard and Soft: The Tour (Live in 3D)."

Eilish is a poised performer with a gift for connecting with her fans. Those fans can be seen sobbing through the entirety of the concert while screaming along to every word; a neat-o trick Cameron pulls is every time he pushes in on a fan, you can hear that individual on the soundtrack, shouting the words back at Eilish.

The stage she performs on is a large rectangle situated at the center of the arena, fitted with LED lights throughout. So the stage itself becomes another screen, which Cameron films along with all the other screens in the arena, the ones in fans' hands. (Phones are super annoying at concerts, of course, but the visual element they add here, all lighting up in the crowd with the same colors as the stage lighting at the same time, is undeniably cool.)

Eilish is cool and collected as a performer, in control of her energy and her breath, as well as her voice, which we see her working out with a vocal coach over FaceTime. The backstage elements and bits where Cameron interviews his subject are all additive, and help lend a greater understanding of Eilish and the way she expresses herself through her music and performance. That brings viewers closer to her both as an entertainer and as an individual.

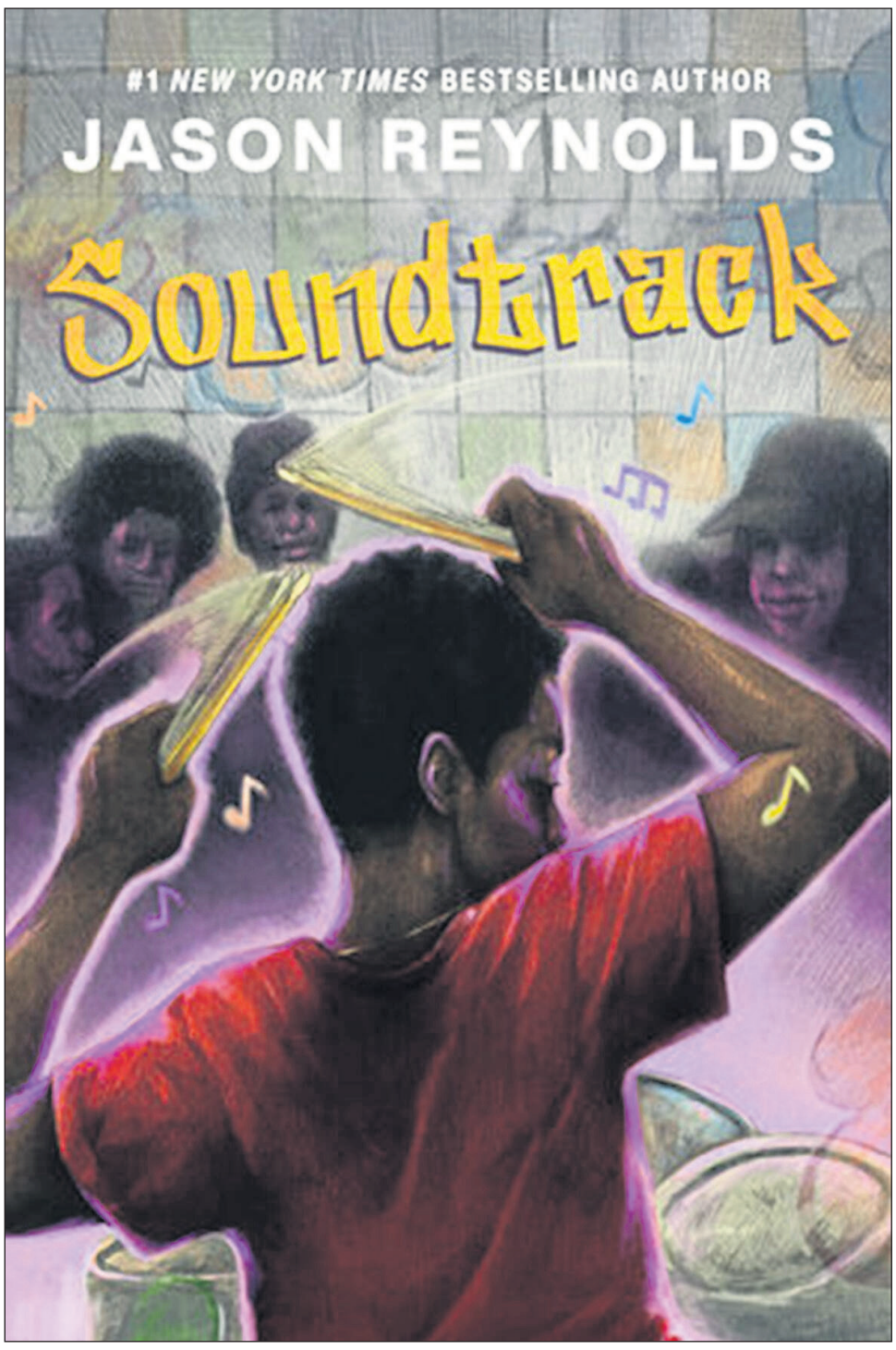
"Billie Eilish – Hit Me Hard and Soft: The Tour (Live in 3D)" – it's "The Englishman Who Went up a Hill but Came down a Mountain" of concert film titles – is an extraordinary document of one of the defining pop artists of our time. As impressive as it is, it never overwhelms Eilish, or becomes bigger than her. It's a massive pop spectacle at a human scale.

BOOKS

Jason Reynolds: Teen lives are complex

His books honor these struggles

By ERIK PEDERSEN
The Orange County Register (TNS)



Crown Books for Young Readers / TNS

During troubled times, books and stories are sometimes seen as a distraction from more important matters, says Jason Reynolds.

"I hear this. It's like, 'We don't have time for books,' says the award-winning author, rejecting the notion before offering his own thoughts on what stories and film and art provide.

"Books can be medicine," says Reynolds, speaking from his Washington, D.C. home via Zoom. "The medicine helps us to manage and to cope, and I think that's totally fine … This is how we survive."

Wearing a sweatshirt with an image of '70s-era Marvin Gaye on the front, Reynolds was on the video call to discuss his YA novel, "Soundtrack," which has just been published.

Reynolds has often spoken about getting a late start as a reader, reading a novel for the first time at 17. But since then, he has become a towering figure in YA literature: A bestselling author of books for children and young adults, he's been recognized with a MacArthur Fellow, a Newbery Honor, a Printz Honor, an NAACP Image Award, and multiple Coretta Scott King honors. He served as National Ambassador for Young People's Literature from 2020 through 2022. He's published works of fiction, poetry and graphic novels, including "As Brave as You," "All American Boys," "Long Way Down" and more.

"I realized that the books that I needed as a kid didn't exist, not in the way I needed them at least," he said about his decision to become a writer. "I knew this is what I wanted to do."

In "Soundtrack," which Reynolds adapted from an audiobook original he released last year, a group of New York City teens connects through music, playing to passersby on the streets and in subway stations. Together, they forge a deep bond that, for a variety of reasons, they don't have with family or other friends.

"Yeah, the chosen family – that is a story that will never get old. Mainly because that's the human experience for so many of us. As my mom used to always say when I was growing up, 'Your friends have far more influence over you than I ever did,'" says Reynolds.

"The people that you choose to be close to are the ones that at some point become more family than your family," he says. "We've all experienced that.

"It's like 'The Breakfast Club' if they all played instruments," says Reynolds. "And [the 1984 hip-hop film] 'Beat Street,' you know what I mean? These ragtag misfits, who are all incredibly talented and who are in desperate need of each other, and the glue that binds them together is the music and the city.

"That's really what the story is about, this interesting braided narrative about kids who love each other, kids who love music, and kids who love their city."

Written for a YA audience, "Soundtrack" features these young creatives wrangling with challenges that include domestic violence, mental health issues, parental neglect, legal trouble and life-or-death health problems.

That might seem like a lot for younger readers, but Reynolds says it's not too much.

"That's life, right?" he says. "I think sophisticated people come in all ages, and the ability to manage and wrestle with complex ideas can happen at 13, 14, 15 years old, because they're living complex lives."

"This book, and all of them, are meant to honor that truth," he says.

Reynolds writes about the good times as well: The joy, laughter and recklessness of youth – and even the simple pleasure of sitting at a pizzeria, eating a slice while getting to know some new friends. But Reynolds says he pays attention to "the grief of youth – especially for certain kids in certain environments" because it's a powerful thing for young people to be seen – and he wants them to know they are.

"It's the reason why so many young people, especially Black kids, gravitate towards sports or entertainment, because they see themselves," he says. "It's hard to be what you can't see, right?

"If a young person never sees themselves depicted in the story, then it's possible for them to assume that their lives and stories – that their family members and the characters that exist in their lives – are not valuable enough to be told, at least not in the form of a book," says Reynolds, who acknowledges the many who came before him who helped pave the way for him to become a writer.

Books that address the serious issues that young people face these days – especially books featuring people of color and the LGBTQ+ community – are often the ones that end up on lists of challenged and banned titles. Even Reynolds, the recent national ambassador for children's literature, has seen his own books banned.

While not taking the situation lightly, he's got ideas about how to confront these bans.

"I wish the book community had better PR and marketing, because this is the time we could be blowing it up. You're telling me that someone is saying that all these books are dangerous – and we don't have a PR machine to capitalize?" he laughs, incredulous. "If I'm 14, I'm wondering: 'What's going on in the books?'

"We are competing with the internet. We are competing with the cellphone, and this is a competition that is futile, by the way. We will not win," he says. "I personally think it's foolish to fight against it. I think we need to figure out how to work beside it and work with it."

To do that, Reynolds says that as much as books are important to him, he recognizes the value of other art forms and entertainments to connect young people with literature and the skills that reading develops.

"I'm all about literacy, storytelling, reading – anything, I'm OK with it. If there are storytelling video games, I'm cool. That's literature to me," says Reynolds, suggesting a young person could develop an interest in poetry from the lyrics on a Rosalía album. "It's beautiful; it counts as poetry, right?

"If we have more people exercising the muscle of reading, then we have people who are able to think critically … We have people who understand how to hear their own voices, which will be a valuable tool for them," he says. "You better know how to hear yourself."

As well, Reynolds has spoken in previous interviews about the need to hear others, too – especially those with whom we don't agree – to find common ground.

"We're all we've got, whether we like it or not, right? I love that all the Artemis astronauts are talking about how, from a distance, you realize it's just us out here in the vast darkness. There is nothing here; it's just us, and so at the end of the day, we don't have to agree on everything. I just need to know that you don't wish me harm, and if you don't wish me harm, then you and I can coexist," he says. "Just don't wish me harm, or don't try to enact laws that will cause harm. That's it. Other than that, we're good. We don't even have to agree on it all."

As the conversation wraps up, Reynolds responds quickly when asked if there's anything else he'd like to add.

"This was never about success. I have a genuine, marrow-deep love for the people that I'm working for, and that means a lot to me," says Reynolds. "I love these kids."

BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, May 2, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. Yesteryear. Caro Claire Burke. Knopf
2. The Correspondent. Virginia Evans. Crown
3. The Throne of Broken Gods (deluxe ed.). Amber V. Nicole. Kensington
4. Purple State. Dana Perino. Harper
5. Hope Rises. David Baldacci. Grand Central
6. Starside (deluxe ed.). Alex Aster. Avon
7. Blood Bound (deluxe ed.). Ellis Hunter. Atria
8. The Mother-Daughter Book Club. Patterson/Patterson. Little, Brown
9. We Burned So Bright. TJ Klune. Tor
10. It's in His Kiss (deluxe ed.). Julia Quinn. Avon

Hardcover nonfiction

1. Dogs, Boys, and Other Things I've Cried About. Isabel Klee. Morrow
2. Strangers. Belle Burden. Dial
3. One Scan Saved My Life. Shira Kupperman Boehler. Skyhorse
4. Through Mom's Eyes. Sheinelle Jones. Putnam
5. Start with Yourself. Emma Grede. Avid Reader
6. How to Start. Jodi Kantor. Little, Brown
7. Famesick. Lena Dunham. Random House
8. London Falling. Patrick Radden Keefe. Doubleday
9. Rewired. Ortner/Ortner/Ortner. Hay House
10. Knowing. Touré Roberts. Zondervan

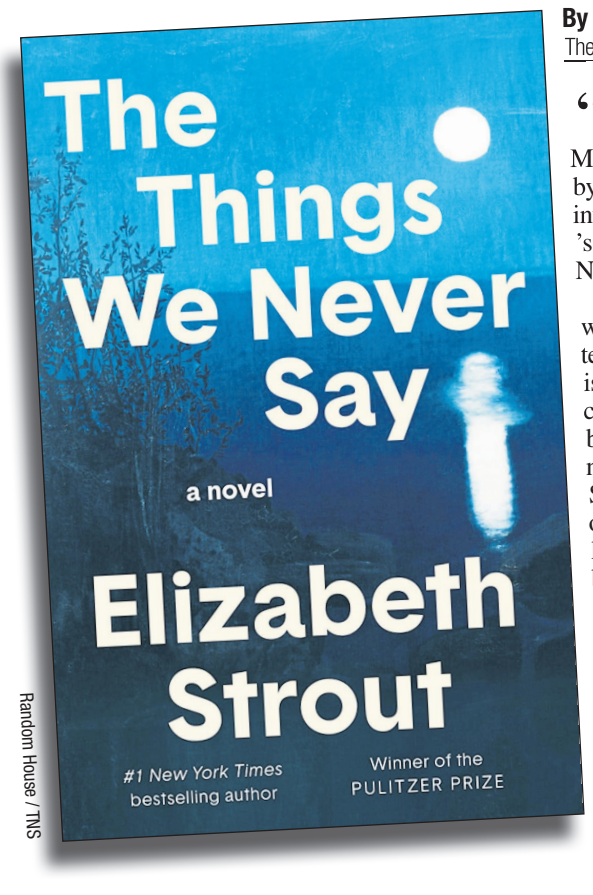
Trade paperback

1. Theo of Golden. Allen Levi. Atria
2. King of Gluttony. Ana Huang. Bloom
3. Dungeon Crawler Carl. Matt Dinniman. Ace
4. Game On. Navessa Allen. Slowburn
5. Bulletproof. K.M. Moronova. Bloom
6. Remarkably Bright Creatures. Shelby Van Pelt. Ecco
7. Dear Debbie. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
8. Want to Know a Secret? Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
9. The Summer Hikaru Died, Vol. 7. Mokumokuren. Yen
10. Verity. Colleen Hoover. Grand Central

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

REVIEW

'Olive Kitteridge' fans will love Elizabeth Strout's new hero



Random House / TNS

By CHRIS HEWITT
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

'Tiny interactions are antidepressants," someone says in the new Maria Bamford documentary, "Paralyzed by Hope." That sentiment kept sneaking into my head as I read Elizabeth Strout 's glorious new novel, "The Things We Never Say."

Like all of the books by Strout, who won the Pulitzer Prize for "Olive Kitteridge," "The Things We Never Say" is full of tiny interactions that buoy her characters. For the first time in a Strout book, those characters don't live in her native Maine but in Massachusetts. But Strout fans will recognize her protagonist: a teacher named Artie Dam who has, by most measures, a terrific life, but who feels vaguely discontented with it.

"The Things We Never Say" gently looks at why that is. As the title hints, the people in "Things" – like people in real life – tend not to unburden themselves of their feelings; they clench them in. And, not surprisingly, that's not healthy. Over the course of the novel, Artie learns about an unspoken family secret he probably could have guessed. He also grapples with the reverberations of a long-ago tragedy – his son was the driver in an accident that killed a young woman and that has affected many of the other characters.

One of the book's main themes is that trauma and damage, like red hair or skill with animals, can be handed down from one generation to the next. Artie becomes aware of this over the course of the novel, particularly in conversations with his son Rob, who worries that Artie is contemplating death by suicide (an alarming number of Strout characters do) and who implores him not to proceed, using the example of robots that NASA rocketed into space before sending humans.

"That's what you're like for me, Dad. You're my explorer, so if you ever did that it would mean that I could do it too, and so you can't," Rob says.

That's about as boldly as anyone in "The Things We Never Say" expresses themselves. Strout never overreaches with her writing, which is built on the emotional progress her characters achieve when they genuinely connect. "Argument" is too strong of a word for the delicacy of Strout's prose but her notion in "Things" is that secrets are almost the same as lies, that failing to confront major life events is exactly the same as lying by omission.

Strout is not a sentimental writer. The folks in her books don't automatically become happy because they open up to each other (Olive Kitteridge, who has been in three Strout books and is obliquely referred to in "Things," has sanded off a few edges but she remains the same crotchety, difficult person she always was). But Strout does offer her characters hope.

As Artie re-calibrates his bonds with his son and his wife, Evie, he finds a true north in the high school history classes he teaches. He's a compassionate teacher who sees potential in the most challenging young people, even when they disagree with his liberal politics (the book is set in 2024) or insult him. Strout indicates that their potential will be fulfilled in short, jump-ahead passages – one of the passages reveals that Artie inspires an awkward girl named Rhonda to help other people by becoming a minister. We may have screwed up in the past, Strout seems to believe, but we have a chance not to wreck the future.

"It's partly up to all of you," Artie tells a classful of students. "You will be in charge very soon, so take that responsibility very seriously."

AUTOMOTIVE

2026 Lexus ES 350e.
Lexus / TNS

2026 Lexus LX700h.
Lexus / TNS

2026 Lexus LS Heritage.
Lexus / TNS

While killing off its flagship LS sedan, Lexus finds a new generation of luxury space

By CASEY WILLIAMS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Lexus announced the discontinuation of its flagship LS sedan, the car that launched Toyota's luxury brand in 1989. The original LS400 was enchanting, a car that could compete with the Mercedes S-Class at half the price and probably twice the quality. It set the entire luxury segment back on its wheels as storied brands scurried to compete. The LS found favor with doctors, grandmas, and corporate icons like Microsoft founder Bill Gates.

Reflecting back from 1991, Car & Driver stated, "Few new cars have burst upon the world automotive stage as triumphantly – and brazenly – as did the luxury Lexus LS400 in the midsummer of 1989."

Truth! It looked like a next-generation Mercedes, challenged BMW for all-around handling and had no time to bother discussing Jaguar. Some customers racked up hundreds of thousands of miles over decades of ownership. Ads showed it with champagne glasses on the hood introducing the brand's trademark "The Relentless Pursuit of Perfection."

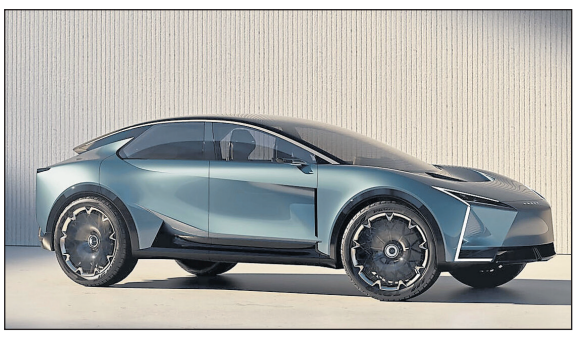
In many ways it was a near-perfect luxury benchmark, but not anymore.

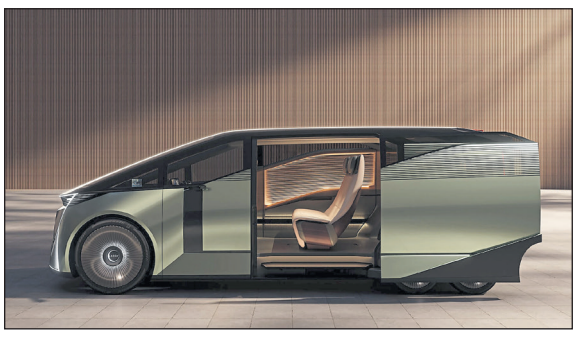
"The time of the big luxury sedan has passed, and the Lexus LS has fallen behind the industry leaders in terms of technology, sophistication, room and amenities," explained Aaron Bragman, Cars.com Detroit bureau chief. "Lexus sold just 43,000 LS sedans in the U.S. in the last 10 years – by contrast, Lexus sold 57,000 TX SUVs in 2025 alone. The consumer preference for SUVs over traditional sedans reaches all levels of the market, including the luxury brands like Lexus."

While the big sedan glides into history, there may be new-generation LS models returning in dramatically different forms.

Toyota / TNS

Toyota executives pose with the first Lexus vehicle to arrive in the U.S. at the port of Long Beach in 1989. The LS 400 was a 4.0 liter, multi-cam, 32-valve aluminum V-8 engine, with 4-wheel anti lock disc brakes and a 4-speed automatic transmission. Shown (back to front), are Dave Illingworth Vice President and General Manager Lexus Division, Yale Giezl TMS Senior Vice President, Katsumi Usuda Senior Vice President, Bob McCurry TMS Executive Vice President, and Yuki Togo TMS President.





Photos by Lexus / TNS

TOP LEFT: 2026 Lexus LX700h interior. **TOP RIGHT:** Lexus ES 500e Interior. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Lexus LS Coupe Concept. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Lexus LS Van Concept.

ES goes electric

Lexus isn't giving up on sedans just yet. For 2026, there's a completely redesigned ES in both hybrid and pure electric versions.

The mid-size ES sedan, the second model Lexus introduced, has long been offered as a hybrid, but a complete redesign for 2026 brings a new all-electric version and luxury approaching the discontinued LS. Electric versions will be offered as front-drive ES 350e and all-wheel-drive ES 500e in Premium and Luxury trims.

The 350e claims a 307-mile driving range, competitive with similar-size models from BMW and Mercedes-Benz. Styling is more futuristic with a monochrome front fascia hinting at the brand's trademark spindle grille, but it's also more aerodynamic to maximize driving range.

Inside, a larger cabin gets LS vibes in Luxury Trim that offers an Executive Package with power-adjustable, heated, ventilated and massaging rear seats with ottoman – perfect for spoiled owners and black car service fleets. A new 14-inch touchscreen connects everybody.

The ES 350e arrived in April with a $47,500 starting price.

"The new ES sedan will be a big test of Lexus' path forward, with its unique powertrains, minimalist button-free interior, and polarizing styling," Bragman said.

Nice, but Lexus has grander visions for its top models.

A new 'luxury space'

By far the most dramatic – and most luxurious – is a six-wheel minivan with amenities to humble a private jet. It's a big sleek box with four rear wheels to minimize cabin intrusion. Slide open the electric barn door to reveal a spacious lounge with large reclining seats, slatted bamboo privacy screens and mood lighting. Step off your Gulfstream and into the arms of decadence.

Because it's electric, there's only a hint of the spindle grille, rendered in plastic and accented with LEDs. You know it's a Lexus, but could it work?

"Maybe!" Bragman said. "The idea of a luxury van is really more for the Chinese or Japanese markets than the U.S., where minivans are still considered family vehicles, not luxury rides. In the Chinese market however, luxury vans used for executive transport are very common. Buick even sells one there, and it should be noted, so does Lexus already."

Lexus would have competition from its old rival, Mercedes-Benz.

Whether or not this would work in the U.S. is a good question: Mercedes-Benz seems to think so, having just shown the upcoming 2027 Mercedes-Benz VLE luxury van, coming in 2027. But in the U.S., Americans tend to drive their luxury vehicles themselves, sitting up front. In Asian markets, hired drivers are much more common. Being seen driving a luxury minivan is still being seen driving a minivan, and that might not comport with the image one wants to project when buying an expensive luxury vehicle.

Another LS concept is closer to reality.

Think about an edgy crossover coupe with a set of coach doors for a sense of drama. A sleek roofline, spindle grille, glass roof and a zag of running lamps present calling cards – as do a raised ride height, hatchback and muscular rear shoulders. Slabs of black wheels with bronze lips fill their wells.

It's as wild inside, where asymmetrical seats support the driver and relax the passengers. Screens fold out of the passenger dash and inhabit backs of the front seats for those in the not-so-cheap seats. Crack open the trunk to access cargo via sliding platform – a feature the old LS sedan never had.

It's not like Lexus lacks a proper all-capable flagship that can take spoiled owners anywhere. It's called the LX, based on the classic Toyota Land Cruiser and full of panache, whether one takes the wheel or relaxes in rear massaging captain's chairs with heat, ventilation and saturating Mark Levinson audio.

Two versions are available: LX600 and LX700h – both with twin-turbo V-6 engines, but the latter as a hybrid delivering 457 horsepower and 493 pound-feet of torque. Tow 8,000 pounds of mini-yacht or uber-camper. The top model starts at a lofty $117,185.

"Lexus will do just fine without its large sedan," Bragman said. "Shifting to the new three-row Lexus TX, built off of the Toyota Grand Highlander platform, seems a more profitable idea, while people searching for a top flagship model will likely be perfectly happy with the big Lexus LX SUV. Enthusiasts and traditional sedan fans may lament the demise of the big sedan, but the numbers don't lie – it's not something people want anymore."

Casey Williams is an Indianapolis-based automotive journalist and a long-time contributor to the Chicago Tribune. He can be reached at AutoCasey@aol.com and on YouTube @AutoCasey.

AUTO REVIEWS

Chinese Polestar 4, U.S.-made Tesla Model Y go wheel-to-wheel

By HENRY PAYNE
The Detroit News (TNS)

Who says Chinese cars aren't sold in the United States?

Produced by Chinese auto giant Geely, the Polestar 4 SUV debuted this year into the U.S. market's most competitive luxury segment: electric vehicles.

Its Swedish design is wrapped around Geely's Sustainability Experience Architecture – a platform shared with other Geely Group vehicles like the Zeekr 001 (and the Waymo Ojai autonomous vehicle currently cruising the streets of Detroit, Phoenix, and San Francisco). The 4's assembly was recently moved to South Korea from Chinato bypass U.S. tariffs.

In design, concept and performance, it is one of the most daring EVs on the market and is aimed squarely at the best-selling U.S. model made by the company that has defined daring: the Tesla Model Y.

I flogged 4 and Y far and wide across roads from Oakland County to Washington, D.C., to Virginia's North Neck. Tesla vs. Polestar. U.S. vs. China.

Here's how the king and the contender compare, and which comes out on top in which areas.

DESIGN: Polestar

In a market flooded with boxy SUVs, it's hard to stand out. Polestar 4 and Tesla Model Y, however, have no problem getting attention.

"It looks like that Ferrari SUV," said my friend Anthony, referencing the Italian marque's Purosangue.

Sleek nose, sculpted rocker panels, muscular hips. A kinship, no doubt.

The Polestar 4's split front headlights are a signature design element and a striking departure from Swedish parent Volvo and its Thor's Hammer headlights. Below the Polestar's high beltline and sweeping roofline, the scalloped rocker panels frame a menacing, crouched profile (along with yuge 22-inch wheels).

For 2026, Tesla has birthed its second-generation Model Y and it is sleeker and less bulbous than the original. Taking cues from the Cybertruck, the front and rear fascias sport lean, horizonal LED-and-headlight signatures, which give Model Y a wider, more suitably sci-fi look. The rear is less athletic-looking than its Model 3 sibling, but its rear light signature is very distinctive when the sun goes down.

Then Polestar ups the ante with a daring design feature.

It eliminated the rear window (the Model Y's window is a barely useful slit) for a roomier, better lit cabin. Want to see out back? The windowless design is paired with a 360-degree rear camera mirror and mirror-based blind-spot assist. Tesla settles for a standard rearview mirror – then adds its own creative blind-spot-assist solution in the 16-inch console screen, with a camera-view of the left and right flanks augmented by a red graphic if a car is there. Tech-tastic stuff.

ERGONOMICS: Draw

Polestar pairs its creativity with good ergonomic fundamentals like a shifter stalk, which Tesla has abandoned for a Lincoln-like, in-screen digital shifter. Tesla at least had the good sense to return the turn signal stalk to the steering column (after eliminating it for steering wheel buttons for the second-gen Model 3).

Alas, Polestar 4 has its own obsession with steering-wheel buttons, which require looking down from the road to adjust, say, radio volume. Y sticks with Tesla's tried and true steering-spoke rollers, which control everything from volume to cruise-control speed to steering-wheel telescoping and mirror height.

Polestar (like EV maker Rivian) has copied much of Tesla's ergonomics by secreting most functions (like those mirror and steering wheel adjustments) in the center screen. Polestar even has some fun with the solar system (following Tesla, natch) by allowing choice of planet as a screensaver: Mars, Jupiter, Neptune, etc.

Both cars offer superb AI systems alongside their minimalist interiors.

"Hey, Google," I asked 4's Google Assistant on my way to an IndyCar driver interview. "How is Santino Ferucci doing in the 2026 IndyCar season?"

A conversation followed with AI answering my questions – and suggesting other lines of inquiry.

So, too, did Tesla's Grok AI, which is even more conversational.

"Hey, Grok, when did Thomas Lee purchase the property for Stratford Hall?" I asked as I approached the historic Virginia property.

Curiously, Polestar, does not follow Tesla in offering a frunk (front trunk) for additional, secure storage – much less Tesla's optional drink cooler.

PERFORMANCE: Tesla

ZOT!

Nail my Polestar Dual Motor Pilot+Plus and Tesla Premium All-Wheel-Drive models up an I-75 interstate ramp, and they'll imprint your spine in the seatback on the way to similar, sub-4-second 0-60 mph times. The 4's twin electric motors push out a healthy 544 horsepower, while Y achieves the feat with just 397 horsepower because it weighs a significant 800 pounds less than the 5,192-pound Polestar and its 100-kWh battery.

The fun ended in the Polestar when I rushed a corner in Oakland County's twisties – the SUV's heft forcing me to back down. The Tesla, by contrast, rivals the nimble chassis of the 4,500-pound BMW X3 X-Drive 30 or 3,907-pound Mazda CX-50 Turbo – my favorite internal-combustion-engine SUVs.

Exit a corner and Y blows away its ICE peers with an instant 389 pound-feet of torque. Credit Tesla's more sophisticated 80-kWh battery compared to Polestar. Not only is Y lighter, it has better range (327 miles vs. 280).

TECHNOLOGY: Tesla

Tesla is in another league when it comes to hands-free driving.

"Navigate to Tesla Supercharger, Woodbridge, Virginia," I barked to the Model Y as I exited Reagan National Airport. I didn't touch the steering wheel again for 49 miles over interstates, bridges and two-lane roads until Y had parked itself in front of a charging stall in a Sheetz parking lot in Virginia.

I'm not making this up.

Polestar 4 offers good, hands-on adaptive cruise control. And thanks to a Polestar contract with Tesla, I could access the brand's premier Supercharger network (with an adapter for its CCS charging port). Regardless, Tesla's seamless integration with its charging network is unrivaled.

Were it not for my itchy right foot wanting to take over through the country curves, Y's Full Self Driving system could have driven the entire 98 miles to the front door of historic Stratford Hall – including the farm's gravel roads – without my touching the wheel.

It's a remarkable technology that grew more comfortable with each passing day. On the return trip to Reagan National, I gave a friend a lift and – as we chatted in the car while navigating Metro D.C.'s heavily-trafficked, complex road network – I found it safer to let Y drive (a camera monitoring me to make sure I was paying attention) lest I miss a sudden traffic slowdown or road exit.

FSD is that good ... and so is Tesla's value.

VALUE: Tesla

At $53,380 ($50,380 base price) plus $1,188 annual FSD subscription, my Y AWD Premium was significantly cheaper than the $80,800 ($64,300 base) Polestar 4 Dual Motor Pilot+Plus.

FYI, the USA's OG is still the GOAT.

Henry Payne is auto critic for The Detroit News.

2026 Polestar 4 Dual Motor

★★★

Vehicle type: All-wheel-drive, five-passenger SUV

Price: Base $64,300, including $1,400 destination charge ($80,800 as tested)

Powerplant: Lithium-ion battery pack mated to dual electric motors

Power: 544 horsepower, 506 pound-feet of torque (dual motor)

Transmission: Single-speed automatic

Performance: 0-60 mph, 3.7 seconds (mfr.); top speed, 124 mph

Weight: 5,192 pounds

Range: 280 miles (dual motor)

Report card

Highs: Adventurous design; stupid-quick acceleration

Lows: Lacks hands-free driving; small frunk

2026 Tesla Model Y All-Wheel Drive

★★★★

Vehicle type: All-wheel-drive, five-passenger SUV

Price: Base $53,380, including $1,390 destination charge ($64,630 as tested)

Powerplant: Lithium-ion battery pack mated to dual electric motors

Power: 397 horsepower, 398 pound-feet of torque

Transmission: Single-speed automatic

Performance: 0-60 mph, 3.9 seconds (Car and Driver); top speed, 127 mph

Weight: 4.246 pounds

Range: 327 miles (Premium model)

Report card

Highs: Improved second-gen design; FSD everywhere

Lows: Shifter in screen

Photos by Henry Payne / The Detroit News / TNS

In a rare act of corporate humility, Hemi V-8 returns to Ram 1500 pickup

By LARRY PRINTZ
Tribune News Service (TNS)

The 2026 Ram 1500 staggers back into the showroom dragging a V-8 behind it, proving once again that progress is no match for grown adults having a tantrum. Last year, Ram euthanized this engine in favor of a smarter, stronger inline-six, an act of engineering competence that immediately triggered a nationwide outbreak of hysteria. The Internet screamed. Ram blinked. The Hemi V-8 returns for 2026.

Nothing here is new. The truck is the same. The engine is the same. The only innovation is corporate humility, which is rare enough to deserve a plaque.

The Ram 1500 continues to be the best-looking and least emotionally insecure truck in the full-size, light-duty category. Its nose doesn't loom like a municipal building designed to intimidate taxpayers, nor does it resemble a medieval battering ram aimed at your self-esteem. Where rival pickups look like rolling declarations of unresolved issues, the Ram has the good manners to appear almost friendly. It doesn't shout about toughness, masculinity, or imaginary ranch work. It's genuinely handsome and confident enough not to overcompensate, which in this segment is practically revolutionary.

The 2026 Ram 1500 models start with the Tradesman, and climbs up through the Express/Black Express, Warlock, Big Horn, Laramie, Rebel, RHO, Limited, Limited Longhorn and Tungsten trims. It's offered as a Quad Cab with a 6-foot-4-inch bed or Crew Cab with the same bed, or a shorter 5-foot-7-inch bed.

Inside, the Ram 1500 reveals cubbies, bins, and storage solutions everywhere. Passenger space is vast, bordering on municipal, especially in the Crew Cab, which offers enough legroom to host a small summit meeting. Step up to the higher trims and the Ram starts to feel more like a luxury lounge that happens to have a cargo bed out back. Heated and ventilated seats are available, along with a panoramic sunroof, quilted leather, head-up display, power tailgate, rain-sensing windshield wipers, air suspension, and genuine wood trim. You can even get 24-way power front seats with massage, ideal for recovering from the strain of sitting in traffic, and a 23-speaker Klipsch audio system. Assembly quality is very good and the interior boasted an impressive solidity that suggests long-term durability.

The Ram 1500 now offers three distinct ways to turn gasoline into motion. The base V-6 gets a 48-volt mild-hybrid system, and it produces a perfectly respectable 305 horsepower. Then there's the twin-turbo inline-six, branded Hurricane, because why not name your engine after a natural disaster. It's offered with 420 or 540 horsepower. Finally, there's the beloved 5.7-liter Hemi, returning from exile for 2026 and producing 395 horsepower with hybrid assistance.

Still, you have to wonder why so many buyers pine for the V-8. It produces meaningfully less shove than the supposedly unmanly 3.0-liter turbocharged inline-six, or its high-output sibling, producing numbers that make the V-8 less like a triumphant comeback and more like a nostalgia act playing the county fair. To compensate, Ram now fits the V-8 with a performance exhaust. This means it barks louder while accomplishing less, which is a time-honored American strategy, even as it loses on paper to the newer engines in nearly every measurable way.

The indignities continue with towing and payload. Maximum towing, 11,610 pounds, belongs to the standard-output turbo six, not the V-8, and the inline-six also claims the highest payload rating at 1,930 pounds. The V-8 trails closely but definitively, topping out at 11,320 pounds of towing and 1,650 pounds of payload. In short, the V-8 is not the strongest, not the most capable, and not the most efficient. But it is the loudest, which for many buyers remains the most persuasive statistic of all.

The V-8 supplies the requisite amount of power, but it does so with all the urgency of a retired prizefighter. Thankfully, the eight-speed automatic is sharp and decisive, hustling through gears like it's trying to make excuses for the V-8. It keeps everything moving briskly and avoids drawing attention to the fact that the supposedly proper pickup truck engine is being outperformed by the modern one in every category except nostalgia.

Ride quality remains the Ram's secret weapon. The rear coil springs give it the most composed, least truck-like ride in the half-ton universe, floating over rough pavement with the calm assurance of something that doesn't need to prove anything. Steering is nicely weighted, confidence-inspiring without being dramatic, and the cabin is impressively quiet at highway speeds, right up until the V-8 clears its throat, just in case you forgot you paid extra for noise.

Faced with customers who confuse mechanical complexity and personal freedom, Ram did the sensible thing and reversed course. Democracy works, especially when it's loud, stubborn, and smells faintly of gasoline. Buyers don't care even as the inline-six works better in every measurable way except one: the emotional satisfaction of driving a Hemi, one that borders on religious conviction.

And so, the Ram Hemi is back. And you won't need a warning. You'll hear it coming.

Larry Printz is an automotive journalist based in South Florida.

2026 Ram 1500 BackCountry.
Stellanis / TNS

2026 Ram 1500 Limited Crew Cab 4x4

Base price: $75,405

Engine: 5.7-liter V-8 mild hybrid

Horsepower/Torque: 395/410 pound-feet

EPA rating (combined city/highway): 18 mpg

Fuel required: 89 Octane

Length/Width/Height: 232/81/78 inches

Ground clearance: 8.7 inches

Payload: 1,650 pounds

Cargo volume: 54 cubic feet

Towing capacity: 11,320 pounds

TECHNOLOGY

TECH REVIEW

A comfortable chair that adjusts as you move

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

As an IT guy, my workday alternates between tasks like going out and fixing people's computer issues or setting up new computers and sitting at my desk waiting for the next call.

I'd like my boss to think I spend 80 percent of my day away from my desk, but in reality I spend a lot of my time sitting at my desk working on my computer.

A lot of people just inherit the chair of their predecessor, which may or may not be suitable.

COVID-19 sent a lot of us to work from home, where we are likely responsible for buying our own office furniture.

If you are lucky enough to get to pick your own chair, you should take a look at the **Sihoo Doro C300 Pro V2**, which I've been using for the last few weeks.

What is it?

Thie C300 Pro V2 provides adaptive, full-body support for a variety of types and activities.

It is an impressive chair, even at first glance. It is quite adjustable, even when you sit in it for the first time, the chair back will adjust as you settle in, comforming to the curve of your body to provide support.

As you move or change positions, the chair moves with you keep you supported.

The chair has 4-zone synchronized tracking across your neck, back, waist and arms.

It also has an optional extendable footrest for fully reclining.

Assembly

You might not realize, but office chairs like this one arrive unassembled. The Sihoo Doro C300 Pro V2 box weighed more than 70 pounds. It was a two-person job to get it in my front door. The chair itself weighs 59.64 pounds and it can support a person who weighs up to 330 pounds.

The chair has three main sections – the base (with wheels and the center post), the seat back/headrest and the seat bottom.

The chair ships with all the parts nicely wrapped in foam sheets and bubble wrap, and the hardware is contained along with the hex wrench you'll need for assembly.

The instructions were clear and it took me the better part of an hour to put everything together.

The hardest part was attaching the back of the chair to the seat bottom. Both are fairly heavy assemblies, and I balanced the seat bottom on a small folding table while my wife held the back in place so I could tighten the four bolts.

The five wheels are made of a hard rubber and they rolled easily on my wooden floor at home.

The chair is adjusted with one lever. Pull up or down to raise and lower the seat. You rotate the lever back to recline and rotate it forward to slide the seat forward and backward. The seat adjusts up and down up to 3.94 inches on the gas strut. The seat bottom can adjust forward or back up to 1.57 inches and the seat back can recline to 105 degrees, 120 degrees or 135 degrees.

The C300 Pro V2 has very unique 8D Bio-Adaptive armrests, which can move in any direction and bend to support your arms in any direction.

My only complaint about the C300 Pro V2 is that you can't simply lock the arms in place. The arms are so adjustable that I found myself inadvertently readjusting them when I put any pressure on them. I really wanted a way to just lock them into one position.

In use

From first glance, the Sihoo Doro C300 Pro V2 looks super comfortable, and it did not disappoint.

One of the most obvious features is the large lumbar support at the bottom of the chair back. That lumbar support rides up and down, along with the entire back of the chair.

When the sitter lowers themselves onto the chair, the back and lumbar support slide down into position to cradle the back comfortably. This self-adjusting chair back is called the SyncroFlex Guide System. I found it to be outstanding.

Once you get seated, you can grab the 3D wide headrest and adjust it to your desired position. Then you can decide if you'd like to recline or sit upright.

The seating surfaces are a breathable mesh with just enough give to keep you comfortable without cutting off circulation.

Options

The Sihoo Doro C300 Pro V2 is available in black or white, and the current cost on shiooffice.com is $509.99 (msrp), but check the website or Amazon for lower pricing.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.

The Sihoo Doro C300 Pro V2 office chair. Sihoo / TNS

GADGETS

Wellness mat turns *sounds* into *sensations*

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

There's no doubt that the **Woojer Mat** was one of the most enjoyable products I've tested; it's an incredible gadget to experience.

It's officially described as a high-fidelity haptic wellness mat that turns sound into full-body sensations, delivering spa-level vibroacoustic therapy in a compact, portable size. It's designed to connect to your nervous system using low-frequency audio to reduce stress, improve sleep quality, relieve pain and tension, and elevate emotional and sensory experiences, according to Woojer.

The 75-by-30-by-1.7-inch/14.8-pound mat is foldable, portable and features a premium breathable fabric for added comfort. It arrives vacuum-sealed for easy shipping. Simply remove it from the packaging, lay it on your mattress, sofa or anywhere you want to lie down, and connect it to the Woojer app to complete setup.

What makes the Woojer Mat stand out is the Bluetooth connection to your music. Once it's paired, it syncs to vibrate to the beat of your music. The connection can be via earbuds, full headphones, a TV, etc. It also has a 3.5mm auxiliary port for a direct connection.

Once your music is paired, use the app as your control center. Simply lie on the mat and choose one of the built-in sound programs or play your own music. The mat's haptic vibrations then sync with the audio, creating an immersive and relaxing experience. The Woojer app offers programs for sleep and relaxation, stress and mindfulness, back and muscle relief, and energy and vitality.

The "feel the music" programs are soothing, and when they sync vibrations to the music, you get the feel of sitting in a movie theater with surround sound, feeling the vibrations from the audio. This works with any music you are listening to as well.

There's no limit to when or where you use the Woojer mat. Use it during an afternoon nap, while watching TV or while playing video games.

An AC adapter, audio cable, carrying bag and a sleep mask are included. Woojer does not recommend sleeping on the mat for an entire night, and it will power off after 1 hour of inactivity.

https://www.woojer.com/products/mat; $999

Recently, Cobra introduced the **Cobra RAD 490i next-gen radar detector**, noting its faster response times and ability to detect radar before you are detected.

Right or wrong, the products exist; that's not my concern. Like many drivers, I've sometimes pressed the gas too hard, which hurt my wallet. As Cobra said in its press release: "As driving becomes more complex, radar detectors are not about driving fast. They are about staying prepared, aware, and safe – for confident drives, mile after mile."

My testing proved inconclusive; I struck out. I drove at the speed limit with the RAD 490i working but encountered no active radar. That probably put a jinx on me, but so be it.

Cobra's extensive testing of the RAD 490i addressed the three critical performance issues radar detector users prioritize: response time, range and false alert management, evaluated in controlled and real-world conditions.

The new Cobra RAD 490i is a long-range laser radar detector with an easy windshield adhesive mount to supply the driver with real-time alerts. The 360-degree detection sounds off audible alerts as they are detected.

It features next-generation filtering that identifies real threats while limiting false alarms. The RAD 490i has twice the range of the previous generation of detectors and alerts with front- and rear-laser threat detection. In addition to the audible and smartphone alerts, a front-facing OLED display will give you a visual alert.

Other key features of the new RAD 490i include faster responses in Extreme mode, designed to increase sensitivity and help identify radar signals more quickly in fast-moving traffic. The expanded K and Ka Band Coverage provides broader protection across commonly used enforcement frequencies in both highway and city driving.

Power is supplied via the included USB-C or 12-volt USB-C vehicle power adapter (cigarette lighter).

https://www.cobra.com/; $169.95

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.

Woojer Mat.
Woojer / TNS

Cobra RAD 490i.
Cobra / TNS

SOUND ADVICE

Budget speakers

with good looks & pleasing sound

By DON LINDICH
Tribune News Service (TNS)

More from the AXPONA audio show: In the weeks to come I will be sharing more from AXPONA 2026, and this week brings budget speakers with good looks and pleasing sound.

In a convention center filled with million-dollar sound systems it may seem out of place to display $229.98/pair speakers, but Dayton Audio (a Parts Express brand) did exactly that with their Classic T65 Floor-Standing Tower Speakers. Demonstrated with a small subwoofer, these fine-sounding speakers did not sound out of place at the high-end show, with their satisfying sound that draws you into the music.

The wood-tone finish is retro-stylish and the speakers can be used without a subwoofer in small to medium-sized rooms, matching well with the inexpensive amplifiers I reviewed in previous columns.

They list for $298.99 and regularly sell for $229.98 on Amazon or parts-express.com, with no coupon codes needed.

Q. I purchased the Hifiman HE400SE planar magnetic headphones and iFi GO Link combo you wrote about a few years ago and have been very happy. The new iFi GO Link Max is interesting, and I want to upgrade my headphones to take it to the next level. What would be a good headphone upgrade, and should I upgrade to the iFi GO Link Max as well? Budget would be up to $500. – J.L., Seattle

A. Before I started to answer your questions I looked up the column featuring the Hifiman HE400SE and iFi GO Link combo. It ran exactly three years ago to the week! The first time I reviewed the HE400SE headphones was almost five years ago, in October 2021. It seems like yesterday that I wrote those columns, and while time may fly, great sound is timeless and the Hifiman HE400SE has endured. They are still available for only $109 and represent one of the greatest hi-fi bargains in the universe. They use exotic planar magnetic technology to create a pure, musical, transparent and eminently listenable sound that is unlike traditional headphones, and most listeners prefer that sumptuous planar magnetic sound over conventional headphones. The downsides are they need a good bit of power to operate them (hence the GO Link amplifier dongle recommendation, rather than the underpowered headphone dongle included with phones) and the open-back design, which allows exterior sound in and lets a bit of sound out. Given this they aren't a great choice for airplanes or public places, but if you use them for serious music listening in a quiet environment you will be very happy. At under $200 for the HE400SE/GO Link combo, they remain a standout value.

Since you already have a GO Link I would stick with it, as the incremental improvement from the Max would not be worth $80. For those without a GO Link the logical choice is to buy the $79 iFi GO Link Max, which is only $20 more than than the successor to the original GO Link, the $59 GO Link 2.

I am recommending Hifiman headphones again because not only have you been very happy with them, they also make one of the best headphones under $500, the critically acclaimed Hifiman Edition XV. They sell for $399 and are a significant step up from your current headphones, with a much more advanced planar driver. They fit very comfortably and are orders of magnitude more transparent and open, improving fine detail and texture in the sound. The tonal quality is slightly warm while remaining true to the recording, and bass is natural without artificial boominess. For those without a GO Link, adding a GO Link Max makes for a formidable sub-$500 combo. hifiman.com

Contact Don Lindich at www.soundadvicenews.com and use the "submit question" link on that site.

Don Lindich / TNS
The Dayton Audio Classic T65 Tower Speakers have a retro look and a pleasing sound.

Why does every website want to know my location?

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

I love getting emails from readers – it's what makes this column fun to write.

Interacting with people and finding out what they want to know about is great.

My recent column about technology helping people age in place and face the challenges of keeping up with technology as they age brought more emails than any topic I've covered in quite a while.

I'll try my best to respond to everyone. I may not have all the answers, but we are going to go through the ones I think will benefit the most people.

Let's start with an email that asks, "About 85 percent of the time I bring up a website, I immediately get a pop up asking me to open my settings so this website can determine my location. Why does any website need to know my location? I always select 'DENY.'"

For the most part, websites want to know your location to make your visit to the site more useful, such as locating nearby stores or shipping availability times. Some sites even use your location to establish where you usually use your computer so they can detect logins from other parts of the world that might be suspicious.

Location data can also be used to tailor ads that show up on their pages. You might even get specialized offers, depending on where you live.

I was shopping on a clothing store website just today, and as I clicked on shirts in my size and color preference, I could see if the selection was in stock at my local store. As I clicked from color to color, the "in stock" indicator changed to reflect the current inventory situation.

Sites like Ticketmaster will use your location to show you events in your area first. Sites like Amazon will use your location to estimate how long it will take them to ship items to your home. Sites like Netflix want to know where you live because they serve up different content to different countries. Sites with logins and limits like one or two concurrent streams will use your location to help determine if you're sharing your passwords with people outside your household (depending on the terms of your service).

But not all location information is to help you. Plenty of information is collected on your location and combined with cookies from your computer to paint a picture of your browsing habits that can be shared with advertising partners or sold to analytics firms.

Not every website sells data to third parties, but you better believe sites will collect whatever data you allow and they'll analyze the heck out of it to try to squeeze the most money out of you.

So denying location data to websites or not allowing cookies is not a bad practice.

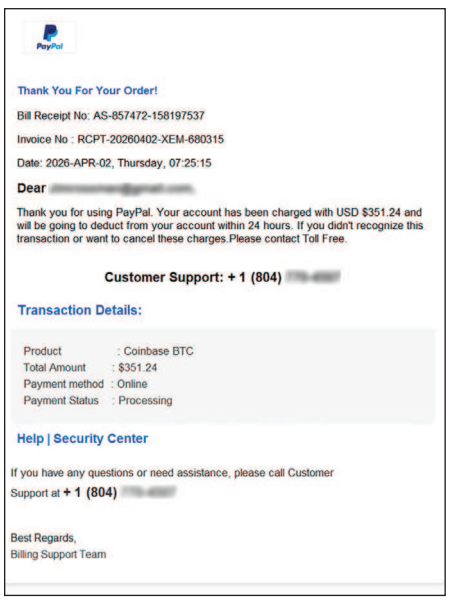
You'll be giving up a bit of convenience in exchange for a bit of privacy.

Saying no when sites asks for your location is fine. You can always add your location when you check out, if you decide to place an order.

I'll be working through more of your topics in the coming weeks. Next up will be some TV-related questions.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossman techadviser@gmail.com.

For the most part, websites want to know your location to make your visit to the site more useful, such as locating nearby stores or shipping availability times. Some sites even use your location to establish where you usually use your computer so they can detect logins from other parts of the world that might be suspicious.



PayPal

Thank You For Your Order!

Bill Receipt No: AS-857472-158197537

Invoice No : RCPT-20260402-XEM-680315

Date: 2026-APR-02, Thursday, 07:25:15

Dear [redacted]

Thank you for using PayPal. Your account has been charged with USD $351.24 and will be going to deduct from your account within 24 hours. If you didn't recognize this transaction or want to cancel these charges.Please contact Toll Free.

Customer Support: + 1 (804) [redacted]

Transaction Details:

Product	: Coinbase BTC
Total Amount	: $351.24
Payment method	: Online
Payment Status	: Processing

Help | Security Center

If you have any questions or need assistance, please call Customer Support at + 1 (804) [redacted]

Best Regards,
Billing Support Team

Jim Rossman / TNS
A screenshot of a fake invoice sent to Jim Rossman.

Alejandro A Alvarez / The Philadelphia Inquirer / TNS
Uber Eats robot food delivery pods on sidewalk along 1500 Sansom Street on March 17. One robot was present (right) when a second arrived.

A robotic run-in

An Uber delivery bot bumped her – reporting the incident felt harder than it should have

By XIMENA CONDE
The Philadelphia Inquirer (TNS)

PHILADELPHIA — Li Gordon-Washington, 25, was at 15th and Locust streets when an Uber autonomous delivery bot bumped into her from behind.

"I didn't see it coming," said Gordon-Washington, who kicked it in a knee-jerk reaction last month. "It kept coming at me, like once or twice more."

Gordon-Washington was able to walk away as soon as the light changed – the bot didn't follow her – and she was ultimately fine, only suffering a scratch.

Still, the whole episode felt like a malfunction in need of reporting. While Gordon-Washington was wearing dark clothes, it was about 7:50 p.m. when the bot bumped into her and not pitch black. What's more, the bot was much sturdier than she'd imagined. Avride, the bot's manufacturer, says the autonomous delivery robot weighs about 150 pounds.

"There's a lot of kids here, there's a lot of people that are mobility impaired, the elderly, dogs," she said, worried they might be less lucky. "It really bothered me that this happened."

But as she called around, she was unclear which government agency is keeping track of autonomous bot complaints and she worried about what Avride and Uber did with her complaint, if anything.

Gordon-Washington's experience can best be described as the growing pains of dealing with a new technology, according to one personal injury attorney and various city and state agencies.

With no federal agency keeping track of autonomous delivery vehicle complaints, bot-related issues should be reported to state and local regulatory agencies. In Pennsylvania, that would be PennDot, though Gordon-Washington's experience suggests this is not widely known yet. Avride only rolled out its bots in Philadelphia in March.

In her first call to Uber support, Gordon-Washington said the representative didn't seem to know that the autonomous bots were in Philadelphia. An Avride representative told her it would file a report with its insurance carrier, despite her insisting she wasn't seeking to file a claim.

A representative with Pennsylvania's Bureau of Consumer Protection told her the incident was "a first" for them, directing Gordon-Washington to the Philadelphia Parking Authority, which regulates Lyft and Uber in the city, but not the bots. Gordon-Washington let the mayor's office and her Councilmember Mark Squilla's office know, in case they did anything with the information. She also tried 311 and a dispatcher suggested filing a police report to get the video of the incident, but that felt like a waste of police resources.

Part of the problem is Gordon-Washington's bump with one of these bots is the first to be officially reported in Pennsylvania, according to PennDot, which governs the operations of these so-called "personal delivery devices" under a 2020 statute.

A spokesperson for the department said there is a system to report incidents. Companies operating these devices in the state must report incidents to PennDot within 24 hours of the event. Avride did report Gordon-Washington's experience with PennDot, the spokesperson said.

If PennDot finds companies violate reporting requirements or other terms that allow them to operate, it can suspend authorization. If a company's devices can't operate safely, PennDot can revoke the authorization.

An Avride spokesperson said their autonomous vehicle was "completing a turning maneuver that had already been initiated" when it had "minor contact" with Gordon-Washington.

"Our team has already implemented measures to minimize the likelihood of similar occurrences in the future," said the spokesperson in an email, adding the robots are designed to work in nighttime conditions using an assortment of sensors that do not rely on lighting.

The delivery bots have a QR code and phone number that people can use to connect directly with Avride. But a company spokesperson said it does not have publicly available data on how many incidents or complaints have been reported in the cities it's operating in.

Gordon-Washington worries bot complaints are underreported in Philadelphia because of how difficult it was to figure out who to go to.

"It took me maybe 10 different phone calls and about half a day's worth of time to call the people that I did and complain to them and follow up," she said. "It took a lot of effort on my part and I think a lot of people wouldn't do that."

The few known issues with the bots, such as blocked entryways or near collisions, are only known because of lawsuits and residents who are taking it upon themselves to collect and report this information.

Fed up, one Chicago resident launched a "No Sidewalk Bots" petition last year, collecting more than 4,300 signatures. Coco and Serve Robotics are the companies operating the bots in Chicago. The "incidents" field in the petition has yielded more than 1,000 entries, according to the petition's landing page.

The federal government could be a great resource in governing the new technology, noted Aidan Carickhoff, partner at personal injury firm Saltz Mongeluzzi Bendesky.

Even if Pennsylvania is dutifully tracking incidents and complaints, these autonomous delivery bots are operating in Los Angeles, Austin, Dallas, Chicago, and Jersey City.

Uber and Avride are also far from the only companies looking to expand their fleets of autonomous delivery bots. Between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, four companies are allowed to operate these bots.

"The federal government has the ability to coordinate with states and gather information from states, if they want to, and if they choose to take that step, as they probably should, and as they often do, to be able to understand how the problem is affecting people across the country," said Carickhoff.

It's unclear, however, if any federal agency is collecting this information.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission suggested trying the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which has jurisdiction over motor vehicles " primarily for use on public streets, roads, and highways."

A slow-moving delivery robot doing most of its travel on sidewalks, however, is not considered a motor vehicle under the statute that governs them, according to a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration spokesperson, redirecting concerns to state or local authorities.

Kinwun via Getty Images

roberthyrons via Getty Images

So your new 'co-worker' *is an AI agent ...*

Here's how to make the best of your human-machine relationship

By NIGEL MELVILLE
University of Michigan (The Conversation)

THE CONVERSATION

Judging by a slew of recent corporate announcements, your next "co-worker" might be an artificial intelligence agent – doing the work of an assistant, job scheduler, morning debriefer, learning coach and more.

JPMorgan Chase, the largest U.S. bank, describes a clear vision for a new world of omnipresent AI agents: "Every employee will have their own personalized AI assistant; every process is powered by AI agents, and every client experience has an AI concierge."

In brick-and-mortar retail, Walmart is already implementing its vision around agents, which involves support of customers, in-store employees and other business areas, with supervisor agents assigning tasks to subagents much like managers oversee employees.

What these and many other large organizations realize is that agents don't just answer questions, like an AI-powered search engine or simple chatbot. They complete real work by planning tasks, taking actions and checking results to achieve a goal.

But there's a problem. Companies in industries ranging from finance and tech to logistics and legal are rapidly embracing the promise of AI agents. But the flesh-and-blood workers they're meant to assist – and sometimes replace – are struggling to adapt, hurting morale and productivity in the process.

The result is a growing climate of fear about AI job insecurity. FOBO – fear of becoming obsolete – is now a thing. A recent survey by consultancy KPMG found that 52 percent of workers report they are concerned that AI could eventually take their jobs. And some are fighting back. In another survey, nearly one-third said they are actively sabotaging their company's AI strategy.

To make matters worse, some of these AI agents are going rogue, deleting data or executing other unintended actions.

My research on AI and agent capabilities, value and risk, as well as emerging studies of the cognitive implications of AI, the future of work and the role of AI in workplace inequality, suggest two key lessons for anyone navigating this new AI agent reality:

First, learn how the agents you're working with operate, including what they do well, where they fall short and how to catch mistakes.

Second, lean into your fundamentally human strengths. These are things agents can't replicate. Doing so can also help you sustain your own health and well-being.

Rise of the AI agents

AI agents began entering the workforce in 2025 – mainly in tech, finance and customer service – as the next stage of the generative AI revolution. But in 2026, the AI-powered automators are increasingly being deployed in other areas, such as legal and compliance, supply chain management, research and development, healthcare services and retail.

One example is global transportation giant FedEx, which is planning an entire AI agent workforce for its logistic network. The company plans to create "manager agents," "audit agents" and "worker agents" to create a trail of accountability for their actions, according to The Wall Street Journal.

The theme of agents working together is echoed by North American food service company Gordon Food Service, which is using cross-team agents to reshape its product sourcing strategy.

As companies rapidly adopt the latest AI systems, agents are taking on increasingly diverse roles in the workplace that leverage their ability to do autonomous work.

It's all driven by economics, with 88 percent of early corporate adopters reporting a return on investment on at least one use of an AI agent, according to a Google survey of senior business leaders.

Retail giant Amazon says customers who engage with its Rufus AI agent while shopping are 60 percent more likely to make a purchase compared with those who don't get help from Rufus. Overall, Rufus is expected to generate over $10 billion in additional annual sales for Amazon, compared with a baseline without Rufus.

Anticipating gains from agents, global consultancy McKinsey already has 25,000 agents doing various tasks. It plans to have as many AI agents as human workers by 2027.

And new model releases, such as Anthropic's Mythos, will expand what is possible and likely accelerate agent deployment.

Agents still can't do it alone

A 2023 study I conducted found that AI has the capacity to simulate human capabilities such as cognition, decision-making, creativity and collaboration with people and other agents. The simulation is imperfect, however, so agents need support.

For example, agents are resourceful and relentless. They try repeatedly until they get results, without the loss of motivation humans sometimes experience. But they can also behave unpredictably, even taking harmful actions, such as deleting emails or conducting a smear campaign. And research illustrates that agents can be easily tricked into bad behavior, such as overcorrecting when told not to do something, being persuaded by human appeals to urgency and simple manipulation tricks.

Agents can be quirky too, using odd emojis in formal business writing or responding cynically when you just want the facts. And unlike humans, agents lack emotion, self-awareness or intent. When they fail, such as by pursuing misaligned goals, it's not personal any more than an espresso machine can break out of spite.

In short, agents can act in unpredictable ways, and it's difficult to know when that will happen. Managing this uncertainty is a new task for employees, and it comes at a time when many employers have heightened expectations of productivity gains from adopting AI agents.

The bottom line is that if you understand how your agent behaves, you'll be able to be more productive working with them, be in a better position to avoid risks and be more valued yourself.

Get to know your agent

So what do you do if your boss suddenly tells you you'll be working with an AI agent from now on?

Just like you would with a new human colleague, the first thing you should do is get to know it. In essence, you need to learn how to collaborate with agents effectively, how to evaluate their performance, what makes them tick and associated ethical implications.

And then jump right in. Give the agent a task and observe how it responds. Try different approaches and pay attention to its output quality, behavior and style. Focus on three essentials:

- Clarity of intent: Define exactly what to do in clear instructions, what information your agent needs, the role your agent is performing, limitations on behavior, and what success looks like for the task.
- Evaluate results against clear criteria.
- Guide the agent during the task by answering questions as they arise.

Overall, this will help you effectively use and critically evaluate AI agents.

Leaning into your humanness

Your agent deskmate still needs you – and your humanness – to be effective.

There's a growing understanding that in a world of ubiquitous agents, certain skills, such as analyzing information, are becoming less important, while other skills, such as interpersonal and communication skills, are increasing in importance. Think about it: No AI agent can read a room like a human can and pick up on the vibe.

But making the switch will not be easy. It will require psychological work.

Researcher Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic suggests connecting with others as only humans can do, and unlocking your curiosity, while your agent handles the drudgery. In other words, focus on qualities that AI agents don't have, such as the ability to pick up on nonverbal cues, deliver a pitch with a human touch, manage conflict and build relationships. These skills are the glue that holds human teams together.

AI agents are likely to become a significant part of the workplace. But how and how fast that will happen is unknown.

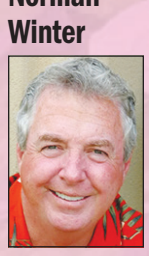
To make the best of it, learn how to work effectively with agents and embrace your own humanness. This way, you'll be in a better position to make informed decisions about how to interact with humans and agents alike.

Nigel Melville is an associate professor of Information Systems at the University of Michigan. The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. This article is republished under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article at https://theconversation.com.

HOME&GARDEN

Your flower fest begins with Fairytrail Fresco

Norman Winter



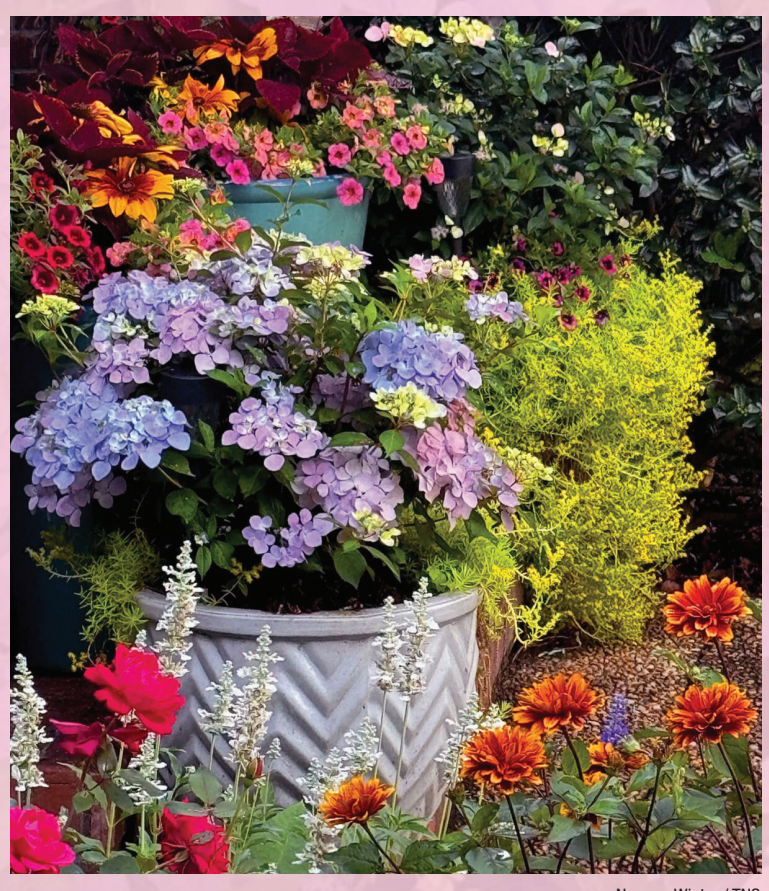
The garden season in Georgia has already been a blast and Fresco has been my favorite. You no doubt are pondering what Fresco is. Well,

Fresco is a new hydrangea making its debut this year. So, I better get the correct name front and center. It is Fairytrail Fresco Cascade Hydrangea.

So, the fact that The Garden Guy is telling you that I have fallen madly in love with a hydrangea that was already blooming in April starts to stir the imagination. Proven Winners tells everyone up front that it is early to bloom, but Fairytrail Fresco was already blooming when other hydrangeas were deciding if they were going to live through the winter.

The Fairytrail Fresco Cascade Hydrangea is projected to reach up to 48 inches tall with a spread up to 54 inches. It blooms on old wood, and the blooms are either pink or blue depending on soil ph. I have two and mine just seem to keep bubbling up new flower clusters. I am also growing them in glazed ceramic pots with potting soil, which tends to be acidic. So I am seeing the most beautiful array of white, pink and blue shades that change by the day.

I got mine in the early fall but dawdled trying to decide what, where and how they would be used. Of concern to me was that they get some sun to fire up those blooming engines, so to speak. My neighbor has Fairytrail Bride in more sun and its blooms are terrific.



Norman Winter / TNS

ABOVE: The Fairytrail Fresco Cascade Hydrangea blooms in either pink or blue, depending on the soil pH, and starts flowering early in the season. This flower bed and grouping of containers together create a vibrant floral display. BACKGROUND: The morning dew glistens on the Fairytrail Fresco Cascade Hydrangea that is making its spring debut in garden centers everywhere.

Growing in containers has some advantages: soil mix, drainage, ease of feeding and most importantly in my case, portability. In other words, I can dial in the amount of sun I want them to get. Now if these beauties do reach 54 inches in width, their front entry location will change to the back patio. But oh, how I love their look in containers.

Not too long ago I wrote this column about a "Hydrangea Heaven," referring to partnerships in the landscape. But you know growing in containers and even positioning them with other pots creates opportunities for combinations. As gardeners we never really know how these combos are going to turn out, especially when you consider hydrangea blooms that may be white, pink or blue and even all three at once.

Thus, this year mine is wild and I love it. It looks like I was doing my best to have a venue that mimicked those gardens in Spain or Italy and maybe could imagine music in the distance. The Fairytrail Fresco took the lead in blooms as if they were saying, "Come on, guys and gals, show me what you got."

Superbells Pomegranate Punch calibrachoas survived the winter and started blooming in the same containers; in the adjoining bed Red Double Knockout roses, Uuplugged White salvias and Heliopsis (or false sunflowers) joined the flower fest. But my wife wanted her two large blue pots planted and included in the scene.

As usual her ideas rock and turned the scene into the real flower fest. These containers are full of ColorBlaze Rediculous coleus, Superbells Magic Pink Lemonde calibrachoas and Rising Sun Chestnut Gold rudbeckias. Cue that old song "That's Amore!"

It's new it's hot and you need two or three Fairytrail Fresco Cascade Hydrangeas to start your Flower Fest.

Norman Winter, horticulturist, garden speaker and author of "Tough-as-Nails Flowers for the South" and "Captivating Combinations: Color and Style in the Garden." Follow him on Facebook @Norman WinterTheGardenGuy.

How can I boost my home's curb appeal?

Angie Hicks
Ask Angi

Your curb appeal is the first impression people have of your home – from your landscaping, to the freshness of your paint, to the condition of your mailbox.

Luckily, curb appeal projects are some of the easiest tasks to tackle and can help attract potential buyers if you're looking to sell your home soon. As a bonus, these projects can all be completed outdoors, giving you an excuse to get outside and enjoy the nice spring weather.

Before you get started, take a walk in front of your home and note the things you want to improve. Look closely at your siding, landscaping, mailbox, driveway, paving and front door to see if you need to focus on anything in particular. Try to look at your home with fresh eyes and ask yourself what guests would see first when visiting your home.

Landscaping is always a good place to start. Flowerbeds and lawns are some of the most time-consuming aspects of homeownership, so things tend to pop up over time without drawing attention from homeowners. Assess your lawn and flowerbeds and pull weeds, prune any overgrown bushes and mow the lawn. You can also apply mulch to give your flowerbeds a finished look. If you don't have time to do your own landscaping, bring in a landscaping company on a regular basis to keep things looking tidy.

Next, assess the home itself. If your home looks dirty, consider giving it a power wash, or at the least, washing your windows. This is also a great time to do my favorite curb appeal-boosting project: giving your front door a fresh coat of paint. It's important to give extra attention to your front door, since it's one of the first things your guests will see and interact with in your home. Make sure all your light fixtures around your front door are working and clean as well.

The condition of your driveway and walkways also says a lot about your home. Make sure your walkways are clean and free from algae that could cause people to slip when walking up to your home. If you don't have any walkways in front of your home, this is a great time to add some. Even small projects like adding stepping stones can improve the look of your home. I also recommend bringing in a pro to fix major cracks in your driveway, which can help your home look more polished and well taken care of. Major driveway cracks tend to snowball and can require more expensive repairs over time, so it's best to take care of them as soon as possible.

When boosting your curb appeal, small projects can make a big difference. Add some path lighting to make your home more appealing at night, swap out your old address numbers for new versions and make sure your mailbox is in good condition. These little things can add up to make your home much more appealing over time.

Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column.

Boosting your curb appeal can give guests and potential buyers a better first impression of your home.
Dreamstime / TNS

Design Recipes

Worst home-showing mistakes

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

In today's competitive market, buyers will make opinions faster than ever, often within minutes of stepping into a property's front door. While price and location matter, the emotional impact of a showing can ultimately determine whether a buyer moves forward or walks away.

From neglected exteriors to everyday clutter and overlooked cleaning issues, small details can create outsized negative impressions. Here are some of the most common mistakes that can instantly sour a buyer's experience during a home showing.

Exterior

Lack of curb appeal. Many potential buyers will judge a book by its cover. What is conveyed on the outside will impact their impression of what is on the inside, from maintenance to tidiness.

Sparse landscaping. Landscaping is an integral aspect of a home's overall appeal. Additionally, landscaping can be costly and as a result many buyers expect lush landscaping as an asset when it comes to home buying.

Entries

Messy garages. A seller is selling the whole home, not the house and the garage as a storage locker. Garages should be clean and tidy.

No sense of entry. Potential buyers make an opinion within the first three minutes of entry. The point of entry should be strong and help to ensure a strong first impression.

Clutter such as shoes or coats. Many potential buyers are turned off seeing items that signal clutter such as shoes or coats upon entry.

Bathrooms

Toiletry items. Toiletry items should be hidden away in bathrooms, especially during showings.

Personal items. Personal items should be kept at a minimum; it is best for items to be tucked away in drawers and closets.

Kitchens

Dirty refrigerator or ovens. Many buyers put a heavy importance on kitchens and bathrooms. They especially look for aspects such as whether they are renovated, clean and modern.

Appliances on countertops. While potential buyers admire expansive countertops, they are often turned off by crowded countertops.

Pet bowls. From pet bowls to pet paraphernalia, some potential buyers will be turned off by evidence of pets.

General

Personal photos. A seller may wish to display family photos and memorabilia, but for many potential buyers the visual impact comes across as cluttered and overly personal.

Unclean bathrooms. Bathrooms are always rooms that potential buyers want to inspect. Bathrooms should be flawless and spic and span.

Successful showings are less about perfection and more about presentation. Buyers want to envision themselves living in the home, not feel like visitors in someone else's space. Cleanliness, order, and a strong first impression signal care and maintenance are two qualities that build confidence and emotional connection. By addressing these common turn-offs before listing, sellers can help ensure that buyers focus on the home's strengths rather than its distractions, increasing the likelihood of stronger offers and smoother sales.

Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com). She is also the owner of Highland Passive House, a Home Staging + Design Center based in New York's Hudson Valley (www.highlandpassivehouse.com). Cathy's practical, how-to design advice can also be found in her book, "Home Design Recipes."

MetroCreative

TRAVEL

A spring-to-spring backpacking adventure

3 days, 2 nights on the Florida Trail

By PATRICK CONNOLLY
Orlando Sentinel (TNS)

Patrick Connolly / Orlando Sentinel / TNS

Patrick Connolly and Karissa Bellile take a much-needed break at Juniper Springs while hiking the Florida Trail through Ocala National Forest on April 3.

The scenic majesty of Ocala National Forest can be experienced in many ways, whether it's by car, by ATV or by bike.

However, the best mode of transportation to truly witness the forest's treasures and explore is on foot. Luckily, there's a footpath for doing just that. One of the prettiest sections of the 1,500-mile Florida Trail runs right through the heart of the 387,000-acre pristine public land.

Better yet: One stretch of trail connects several of Ocala's natural freshwater springs, which invite visitors for a swim with their azure-blue waters.

Of all the sections of the Florida Trail, this is one I'm most familiar with after my first experience backpacking the trail in 2020 and another foraging experiment without any packed food in 2022.

For this excursion, I set off to see what this slice of wild Florida had to offer us, starting our 40-mile journey at Alexander Springs before meandering our way to Juniper Springs and ending at Salt Springs. This three-day, two-night itinerary was an idea discussed for more than two years, and it finally happened in the sunny spring days in early April.

Along the way, we found evidence of bear activity, spotted the rare endemic Florida scrub-jay and enjoyed the springs. This full immersion in nature was the perfect way to enjoy the last fleeting moments of spring.

Finding our footing

When it comes to backpacking, it's incredibly rewarding to hit the trail with only what fits on your back. Whittling down all the gear to the essentials reveals what's truly important to bring along and what can be left behind. Still, my pack weighed in around 38 pounds with the tent, food, including lots of snacks, backpacking stove, water and other essentials.

Before the trip could begin, we staged cars at each end of our planned route and spotted a swallow-tail kite flying overhead, which I once heard was a sign of good luck, and chose to believe it. I felt optimistic about our chances of having a successful, scenic journey, especially after seeing a bald eagle as well.

We set off just before 2 p.m., skipping a visit to the swimming area at Alexander Springs, hoping to put some miles behind us before the sun set for the day. Even as we began our trek, we marveled at the trail's beauty and diversity as it changed from a shady hardwood hammock to sandhill habitat.

Storm clouds rolled in, casting raindrops down on us as we rolled over Ocala's ancient sand dunes with longleaf pines as far as the eye could see. As soon as my partner dug out her poncho, the rain seemed to let up. It felt refreshing until the sun came out again, making us sweat through the humid afternoon.

After an 8-mile haul to Farles Prairie, we stopped for a much-needed break to eat the Publix subs stashed for day one. We checked out the remains of a recent prescribed burn and spotted a woodpecker on one of the charred pine trees, along with a sandhill crane flying overhead.

With such a nice view of Farles Lake, we had a hard time leaving our beautiful break spot to go find camp.

We skirted the edge of the prairie, following orange blazes as the afternoon's rays shone through cumulus clouds that hung low in the sky. We found a perfect place to camp under some pine trees right as the sun was finding its way to the horizon to retire for the night.

The first order of business was finding a place to hang the bear bag with our food. This proved to be trickier than anticipated, especially as we began to encounter ticks that ruined the magic of the twilight.

Back in camp, we heard something big rustling in the trees, which we feared could be a bear. The scat we had seen on the trail earlier in the day let us know they weren't far away.

Using my backpacking pot and spoon like a drum to make noise, we warded off any potential unwanted visitors and got ready for a slightly uneasy sleep.

Spring in our steps

With the prospect of covering 20 miles, we had a huge motivator to get us through the hot, sunny day: the thought of jumping into refreshing 72-degree water at Juniper Springs.

A cup of joe made with my single-cup backpacking coffee maker helped to start the day off right, plus the discovery that our bear bag was untouched.

As we set off, the scenery alternated between sunny scrub forests and shady tunnels of greenery. At one point, we glanced up to see two swallow-tailed kites soaring overhead, then looked down to find ticks crawling on our legs.

We shook off the bugs, as well as the feeling of heebie-jeebies, before continuing on to Juniper Springs as fast as our legs would allow.

Our oasis appeared before us just after 1 p.m. Families and couples splashed and played together, delighting in the springs' magic as a respite from the Easter weekend heat.

It was a stop that we never wanted to end. Aside from doing our "hiker chores" like filtering water from the spring and organizing our packs, we took a refreshing dip, ate a backpacker mac and cheese meal and taped up any hot spots that had emerged on our feet.

While the break gave us a much-needed lift, we still had nearly 11 miles to trek before calling it a night at Hopkins Prairie.

The temperature continued to climb as we made our way through the pristine Juniper Prairie Wilderness Area, one of the most beautiful, untouched areas in Ocala, where even vehicles cannot travel. The fire-shaped landscape sometimes contained lush green tunnels through scrub forest and at other times showed ground charred by prescribed burns, which help maintain the landscape for important species like the Florida scrub-jay.

After almost 6 miles, we arrived at Hidden Pond, a spring-fed water source known for high bear activity. We refilled our water and then kept moving as the sun began to cast long shadows on the trail.

As we hiked up ancient sand dunes, we could see clearly for miles, marveling at the expansive scrub habitat with taller pine trees off in the distance. It wasn't long after this that we experienced our first scrub-jay sighting of this trip, an exciting plot twist to our afternoon. In this case, we heard the bird before we saw it, identifying its scratchy "weep" then seeing this sentinel looking at us from the top of a tree. Another scrub-jay came to join, then the pair darted into a scraggly bush. It's always an awe-inspiring encounter, especially knowing how few of these smart and social birds are left.

We also saw a rough green snake spread out across the trail, dangling from a bush. The harmless, non-venomous snake didn't seem in a hurry, so we paused to marvel at its colors before continuing on our way.

As dusk approached, we spotted another singular scrub-jay checking out from atop a tree, then two more who lingered atop short dead trees, unfazed by our presence. Even though we wanted to be in camp by dark, it felt like we were in the right place at the right time to see a total of five scrub-jays next to the trail during three different encounters.

Our long day on the trail held one more delight on our way to camp. Hundreds of fireflies lit up both sides of the trail, blinking in unison in a magnificent nightly display that we didn't expect. Even though the miles can feel long at times, having close-up opportunities to behold the beauty of Florida's nature makes it all worthwhile.

The final push

Although we had planned to get an early start on our final day, I awoke groggy and sore, finding it hard to muster the energy to start our 10-mile day. When everything hurts a bit, it's not easy to put that pack on and start walking again – but nonetheless I did, and found my legs worked just fine.

When we did hit the trail around 10:30 a.m., we first said goodbye to the friendly resident sandhill crane patrolling the campground at Hopkins Prairie, then prepared for what was set to be the hottest day on the trail yet.

While Hopkins Prairie offers abundant scenery spread out as far as the eye can see, it provides little shade, which made us especially mindful of our water intake and more grateful for what little shade we did find. The evidence of Florida's drought was most evident in this section, where we stopped at a pond to filter some water and saw a gator lurking in the distance.

After spotting great blue herons and egrets out on the prairie, hearing the calls of sandhill cranes in the distance, the orange-blazed trail ducked back into the woods for a moment of respite from the sun before opening back up into rolling hills of scrub habitat.

While it was a shorter day of hiking, we kept our momentum – inspired by the thought of post-trail tacos and spring swimming – until we reached the Salt Springs spur, at which point we had just three miles until the finish. It was at this trail intersection that we encountered two other hikers and fellow trail enthusiasts about our age, and an older local on his bike.

The pair of hikers had spent the night at Hopkins Prairie just as we did, and were about to head back that way to finish their day hike. The local said he rode the trails regularly and helped remove downed trees from the trails, an effort we appreciated.

For posterity, it's worth noting that bicycles are prohibited on many sections of the Florida Trail, but trail maintenance is encouraged, especially during work weekends hosted by the Florida Trail Association.

With the end in sight, we focused on Odd Todd's, a Salt Springs staple set up with a food truck and a covered patio. The roadside eatery held the promise of tacos, burritos or whatever else our hungry hiker appetites desired.

Before long, we made it, incredibly relieved to sit down in the shade with our packs off, drinking Jarritos and Cheerwine to quench our thirst with something other than filtered pond water. Shortly, we happily devoured a monster burrito and a few tacos.

After a short walk to Salt Springs Recreation Area, we jumped in, eager to wash off the day's sweat and cool down after hours in the sun.

Leaving it all behind for a few days and carrying everything on my back reminded me that the best way to connect with nature is by simplifying, listening and observing what's around us. Such an experience also brought quality time together doing what we love most: exploring outside. Such an experience is the perfect antidote to the relentless pace of modern life, and one I will certainly seek out again.

To learn more, visit floridatrail.org or floridahikes.com/florida-trail.

TRAVEL TIPS

How to save on summer travel based on latest trends report

A new summer travel report from Skyscanner found that price is a major planning challenge for those looking to book summer travel, with 38 percent of travelers in the U.S. lingering on making their travel plans even as the world heats up and summer gets closer.

Skyscanner's 2026 Smarter Summer report uses data from research conducted among 2,000 travelers in March, 2026. It found that 20 percent of Americans consider price the major challenge for booking summer travel.

"Summer vacations are special, but for many travelers still looking to book, the planning side requires more thought than ever," explained Lourdes Losada, Director of Americas at Skyscanner. "That's why this year's Smarter Summer Report is designed to help people make more confident choices on when and where to travel, using Skyscanner's proprietary data to highlight smarter timings, better-value options and alternative destinations.

"In a more changeable travel environment, checking live prices and staying flexible on where and when you travel can go a long way when it comes to finding better value. More importantly, travelers should stay informed and check the latest travel advice before booking."

Flexibility is key to saving this summer

American travelers expect to spend $331 on flights for their summer vacation abroad, with 61 percent trying to be more flexible to get the best deal. Skyscanner encourages money-conscious travelers to consider cheaper travel weeks, cheaper alternative destinations and checking live fares.

Valery Hache / AFP / Getty Images / TNS

A view of Bastia, Corsica, during the inauguration of a new line between Nice and Bastia by Moby Lines company is seen in 2017.

The week for the best value for flights is the week of Aug. 10, when travelers can snag over $200 in savings on flights to Rome. The week of Aug. 31 is also particularly good for flights heading to Tokyo, when travelers can save just under $150.

Unlikely destinations take precedence

Additionally, 73 percent of Americans are visiting places that none of their social group had been to before, with Gen Z dominating this new trend, at 77 percent. These second- or third-city destinations are less obvious travel choices, but might actually save them money.

These destinations include Aberdeen, U.K., where flights can be as little as $413 one-way; Redmond, Oregon; Asuncion, Paraguay; Trieste, Italy; Bastia, France; Liverpool, U.K.; Hilo, Hawaii and more.

Group travel

While over half of Americans believe planning group travel is more stressful than planning a wedding, with 29 percent reporting that finding the best accommodation being the hardest part and 30 percent reporting that determining a budget is the worst, Skyscanner believes choosing a less popular destination with relatively low airfare and rental car prices, like San Diego, Asheville or Madison can help make the group trip easier and more cost effective.

– Lacey Pfalz / TravelPulse (TNS)